

AN INSPECTOR LITTLEJOHN MYSTERY

*The Case  
of the  
Demented  
Spiv*

GEORGE BELLAIRS

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*The New York Times*

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# **The Case of the Demented Spiv**

by  
George Bellairs



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## CHAPTER ONE

## THE DEMENTED SPIV

AT the Oddfellows' Arms, Brockfield, they had come to the end of a perfect day and with the help of Drake and his merry, merry men had laid the enemy low. Or rather Jack Stansfield had done it with the assistance of several pints of beer, a tinny piano and a reedy tenor voice. To mark their approval the occupants of the bar parlour clapped unanimously or banged their pots on the beery table-tops, and one occupant, half-seas-over, emptied his glass in the piano in gratitude for its share in the victory.

It was an October Saturday night and raining cats and dogs outside. That hadn't kept the regulars away, of course. The crack of doom couldn't have done that. But the casuals were missing and that irritated the landlord. He almost struck the man who'd lubricated the piano, but the offender was silly with drink and kept on grinning and saying it was a "good ole pianner." What can you do with anyone like that? But it caused an awkward lull in the good-feeling for a bit. They asked Stansfield to sing an encore and after a florid introduction, played by ear by the paid accompanist, he started "Absent."

*Sometimes, between long shadows on the grass....*

It floated out feebly into the deserted street and made the solitary policeman, standing under a gas-lamp, his cape shining like jet with the rain, wish he were in the warm, steamy pub instead of outside. He'd still four hours of this to endure. The red lamp on the top of the police-box nearby began to twinkle and he hurried to answer the telephone in the cupboard underneath it. Some children had been letting off fireworks prematurely and were keeping an old lady on tenterhooks waiting for the next bang. He'd better go and see about it.

"Very good.... I'll go...."

Nothing exciting ever happened in Brockfield. A few drunks, kids with fireworks, cats left in lock-up shops over week-end, stray dogs.... The constable sighed. He was fed-up.

The church next door to the Oddfellows' Arms was a blaze of light. They were holding a revivalist rally. Brockfield has more pubs and churches per square mile than any other town in England. Any of the

burgesses will tell you that. Of course, other towns boast the same thing, but we can't waste time refuting it. The fact was that the big, well-illuminated church was full of people and they couldn't begin the service because the organist was missing. The deputy organist was laid-up with lumbago, too, and they were in a fix. The only other person who could play was the preacher himself, and as it was quite impossible to work the people up satisfactorily without a rousing hymn beforehand, the parson had to keep leaving the pulpit, playing a verse or two and then hurrying back to say what he had to say before the congregation went off the boil. It was hard work. Everyone was annoyed with the fugitive organist, to say the least of it. Strains of Drake and his merry, merry men and Absent floated in now and then from the Oddfellows' next door, and they had to close the windows on that side, although the church was like an oven from congestion.

Rain lashed the street as the dripping constable returned to his stand under the gas-lamp. He had effectively silenced the young pyrotechnicians, who, on account of the rain, had been lighting their thunder-flashes under their jackets and then throwing them into convenient dust-bins to go off. Now the bobby had nothing to do but get wet. He longed for a drunken brawl to break out, or even a serious road accident. Anything where he could behave with efficiency and earn a pat on the back from his superior officers, who were beginning to regard the hush of law and order in the town with suspicion. The police always missing when they were wanted, so to speak. As if P.C. 132 could help it....

Now they were singing "Abide with me" in the church and the strains having reached the Oddfellows', the occupants of the bar parlour took it up, and chapel and pub side by side echoed the same hymn. P.C. 132 stopped his troubled thinking to listen and said to himself it sounded very nice and that people weren't always as pagan as you thought they were....

Suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, trouble invaded the sodden, silent street. A closed van with headlamps full on, dazzling the eyes until they pained, and lighting up the floods of water rushing to the gutters, zigzagged dangerously down the incline of shining cobblestones and pulled-up with a frightful squeal of brakes in front of the Oddfellows' Arms. The door opened and was closed again with a bang and a flying figure ran into the pub. P.C. 132 ponderously crossed the road and began to examine the vehicle....

“Give me a double brandy,” the newcomer was saying inside the inn. Unable to find anyone at the little bar at one end of the long corridor which led from the vestibule, he had opened the door of the bar parlour.

At the sight of him, the occupants suddenly stopped singing. Some of them left their mouths open in surprise, the song suddenly cut off from them.

“Give me a double brandy....”

“We haven’t any,” said the landlord, still in a bad temper. He had some hidden away for special occasions but he wasn’t serving it to any Tom, Dick or Harry who had the cheek to call on the off-chance and ask for a double.

“Give me anything....”

“Only rum....”

“For God’s sake... Rum... Anything....”

The man looked in a state of collapse. He was wet through and bare-headed. His dark, long hair was so heavily oiled that the rain formed in globules on it and ran down his face and back instead of soaking in. Narrow slits of eyes, a thin, long, pointed nose, and a fleshy-lipped mouth with a streak of dark moustache across the top of it. Dazzled by the light and apparently thrown into confusion by some unknown terror, he grimaced and twitched like an idiot. The rain ran from his clothes and formed a pool round his feet....

The customers of the pub looked hard at him and summed him up. A cheapjack, a street-corner boy, the sort who stood on the local open-air market selling odds and ends of jewellery, and, on the sly, clothing coupons. They gave him the collective cold-shoulder at once. They were all honest-to-goodness working folk and there was no place for an easy-money boy among them. They eyed his clothes with disdain. Heavy overcoat of light cloth, with high padded shoulders and waist pinched in like a pair of corsets; limp, soaked, baggy trousers escaping from beneath the coat and falling low on a pair of long, brown pointed-toed shoes. The trembling hand holding the double rum was long and mean, but the finger-nails were effeminately manicured....

“Give me another....”

The landlord reluctantly did so. The chap was so obviously all-in, it seemed a kindness to do it. Especially after singing a hymn....

The outer door opened and closed and P.C. 132 stood with his huge back to it, taking all in before enquiring what it was all about.

“Spiv....”

One of the party more impudent than the rest and made bold by beer, uttered the word like an expectoration. The rest sniggered and looked pleased at the joke.

The word seemed like the last straw to the strange figure in the padded coat. He removed the glass, from which he was gulping, from his mouth with a gesture so quick that it spilled the contents half-way across the room.

“Spiv, did you say...?”

The man who had been bold, braced himself against the wall behind his chair as though expecting a sudden assault.

“Spiv.... Yes, I am a spiv. That’s what they all say. They stop in the street and shout it after me. Well, they’re right. I am a spiv. I’m a spiv... spiv... spiv....”

He shouted the word as though it pleased him, like someone who has earned a degree or received a title mouthing it to himself with deep satisfaction. He stood there, the rain dripping from him, his slits of eyes now widened and round, terror in every line of his body.

“’ere, ’ere, what’s all this?”

The huge figure of the law stood in the doorway. Everyone sighed with relief. They didn’t quite know how to deal with the situation. P.C. 132 looked ready for anything.

“What’s all this?”

The newcomer turned and faced the officer.

“I’m a spiv....”

“Well, now, who’d have thought it?”

The bobby was being heavily jocular, but the man in the waisted overcoat was deadly serious.

“Yes.... But whatever I’ve done, I never killed anybody. I didn’t do it.... I swear I didn’t....”

The constable stiffened and towered over the man.

“Who says anybody’s killed somebody?” he said in his best constabulary style.

“I didn’t do it.... He was dead when I got there....”

The drinkers round the fire were petrified. They all sat there like the cast of “The Sleeping Beauty” struck immobile by the witch’s curse.

“Where’ve you come from and what you been doin’?”

“Fennings’ Mill.... I didn’t do it....”



The constable placed a warning hand on the stranger's shoulder and it seemed that that was all that was needed to crack him up altogether. As though the huge paw were a ton in weight, the man crumpled under it, sank to the tiled floor and sat there talking to himself.

"He was dead, staring at me. I didn't do it. I'm not a murderer; I'm only a spiv..."

The embarrassed bobby stooped with difficulty, for his cape and his paunch impeded any bending movement, and tried to raise the man.

"He's gone off his rocker," said someone.

There was a murmur of general assent.

The constable looked angrily at the figure on the floor, jerked back his helmeted head as though seeking guidance from heaven, and then rubbed his chin with the back of his hand.

"I'm phonin' for help," he said. "You lot look after 'im till I get back."

And he stamped purposefully out and across to the police-box. Something was happening with a vengeance now!

Back at the inn, the occupants of the bar parlour, men and women, were on their feet and had gathered round the stranger, like participants in a parlour game. The man on the floor was sitting there, fully conscious, talking to himself an unintelligible gibberish, but in a tone of self-comfort and excuse.

Two more constables soon arrived and the little posse picked up the spiv, carried him out, dumped him in his own van and drove him to the police station, where, in due course, the surgeon with the concurrence of a colleague, certified him as having the balance of his mind disturbed, to say the least of it, and committed him to the asylum under police guard.

"Better have a look at Fennings' Mill and see what he's been at," said the Inspector on duty to P.C. 132 after hearing his report. "Expect it's just a mad tale, but we'd better look round."

Fennings' Mill was an old stone factory, chiefly engaged in weaving cotton for shirtings, and stood just behind the police station. It was approached by a maze of narrow streets, terminating in a large walled croft on which stood the mill, with dumps for coal, packing cases, warehouses and a small reservoir for the engines, surrounding it.

There was no watchman on duty, but the constables found the iron gates which broke the surrounding wall wide open.

"Hullo," said P.C. 132 gruffly.

“Hullo,” said his colleague, 124, in another key.

“So there ’as been somethin’ up!”

“Looks like it.”

There was a gas-lamp burning near the gates. It threw long shadows down the alley and illuminated a few scuttering rats. Otherwise there was nobody about. The rain was still coming down in torrents. A real night for keeping people indoors.

The constables turned on their torches and cautiously walked across the cobblestoned mill-yard. All was still. The first building was a block of stone offices, single-storied, the lower halves of its windows covered in gauze screens with W. & H. J. Fenning, Ltd., printed across them in gilt. The bobbies tried the doors, which they found locked.

Next, the main entrance to the mill itself. Doors locked here, too. No signs of disturbance at all. Then the boiler-house, where they fired the great furnaces to drive the engine. This was secure and safe behind its drawn steel shutters. Beyond, you could hear the crackle of the fires, damped down for the week-end. Steam hissed somewhere, gently like a distant angry snake. Otherwise, not a sound.

“Urn,” said P.C. 132.

“Aye,” assented 124.

“Better try the warehouse. Looks like a false alarm.”

They tramped across the yard to the square, two-storied block which held the raw yarn and the finished products awaiting delivery.

The door was open!

The two policemen entered shoulder to shoulder, as though expecting a massed attack of startled intruders. All was quiet, however, but on the floor, about a dozen paces from the door, lay a figure, staring at the ceiling. The open eyes and the livid face gave the constables quite a turn. They groaned with surprise.

“Jeepers!” said 124.

“Wot?” said 132.

“I only said ‘Jeepers’.”

P.C. 132, his mind momentarily removed from the horror at his feet by his comrade’s strange utterance, looked puzzled and then switched back to business.

“Bin strangled by the looks of it....”

“’orrible....”

"I'll say. Better ring-up the station. Is that a 'phone in that corner over there?"

Whilst his colleague telephoned for help, P.C. 132 knelt with an effort and cautiously examined the body.

"We found a dead body 'ere in Fennings' warehouse. Yes, stone dead. Strangled by the look o' things. Very good, sir...."

"Hey, look at this," shouted P.C. 132 to P.C. 124.

"What?... Who is he?"

"I don't know. But look at this."

With a heavy finger the constable indicated the upper lip of the corpse. It was covered by a large dark moustache, obviously a false one. The constable touched the cheeks, too, and then looked at his finger under the light of his lamp.

"Theatrical paint!" he murmured as though to himself. "He's disguised himself or somethin'...."

"Rum go, isn't it?"

"I know that face. Seen it before somewhere. Now...."

The policeman pondered and then, suddenly growing impatient, bent and pulled off the false moustache.

"Got to come off anyhow. Might as well," he said as though excusing himself to himself.

"See who it is? See who it is?"

P.C. 124 was almost beside himself with the delight of discovery.

"Why, it's Ambrose Barrow, secretary of this 'ere mill."

"Right you are, Joe."

"No wonder they was runnin' about like a lot of loonies at Hake Street Chapel to-night. He's organist there and they've some sort o' special service on. Put 'em in queer street when he didn't turn up."

"I'll bet it did, Joe. And them little thinkin' he was lyin' here, dead. Strangled...."

"I wonder if that spiv done it."

The two policemen drew closer together. It was eerie in the dim light, with the rain dripping monotonously outside and the rush of water in the gutters overhead. Somewhere, the yowling of a cat split the air. Rats were scuttering about on the floor above.

"No wonder 'e went potty and they had to put him away," said P.C. 132.

"I'll say," answered his mate.

## CHAPTER TWO

## IN THE HEADLINES

FROM being a small-town nine-days'-wonder, the case suddenly flared up to national proportions.

The police who took the demented spiv to the asylum had a rough time with him. He thought he was being arrested for murder and grew violent. They had to hold him down, which, apart from the strength generated by his frenzy, wasn't a difficult job. He was slim and flabby and when his large exaggerated overcoat and baggy trousers were removed, he looked half the size of the man who had caused the commotion at the Oddfellows' Arms.

Ambrose Barrow was a medium-sized, heavily-built man of middle-age and in good physical condition. Unassisted, the spiv, whose name appeared to be Samuel Judge, could never in his life have strangled Barrow. And the police surgeon stated that it was a case of deliberate throttling after a scuffle and that the dead man had not otherwise been injured. No blow to knock him senseless; cold-blooded strangling, presumably with his assailant sitting on top of him.

All this puzzled Inspector Faddiman of the local police. Taking the circumstances into account, it looked as if someone had killed Barrow before Sammy Judge arrived and that the little spiv's tale was true. What, then, was Barrow doing in the warehouse when he met his death? Why was he disguised? And what had he to do with Judge?

There was no doing any good with Judge for several days. When interviewed at the asylum by the police, he could give no intelligible account of his movements in Brockfield on the day and night of the crime. All he could do was protest his innocence, shriek to be released, weep as he denied ever having murdered anyone, and then lapse into fits of silent moodiness. The police found Sammy's home address from letters in his wallet and got in touch with it. This resulted in the arrival in Brockfield of an inflated replica of Sammy Judge, padded overcoat and the rest to match, who declared he was the spiv's brother and had come to take him home.

When the police declined to let Sammy go, his brother, Benny, threatened them with all kinds of horrible things. He talked of bringing his lawyer, of suing for wrongful detention, of making the doctors who had certified poor Sammy sit up and pay huge damages, and other pains and penalties. The police pointed out that Sammy was a self-confessed intruder

in enclosed premises and would therefore be held in custody whatever Benny said or did. So, Benny, having satisfied himself concerning the expenses of his brother's detention, departed for the time being, but before doing so gave the police some information about Sammy's business and condition.

First of all, Benny Judge hotly denied that his brother was a spiv. He asked for a definition of the strange term, denying that he had ever heard it before. On receiving a somewhat halting explanation from a police sergeant, he indignantly repudiated the epithet. Sammy was an honest, hard-working merchant, who sold goods on open markets and always took the necessary number of clothing coupons for them when regulations required them. He said he had no idea what Sammy had been up to at Fennings' Mill on the night of the crime, but that they could take it from him it must have been honest and above board.

Inspector Faddiman was a thoroughgoing officer and left no stone unturned in the investigation. He found out from Fennings that, after a meticulous stocktaking consequent upon the occurrence of the mysterious crime on their premises, they had discovered their stock was light by several thousands of pounds. At first they pooh-poohed the suggestion that Ambrose Barrow was responsible for the losses. He had been with them since he left school and had, by steady, faithful service, risen from office boy to be the secretary of the company. But later, a closer examination of the stock-books revealed alterations in the figures. The books were locked up in a safe to which only Barrow and two of the directors held the keys. It looked, therefore, that Ambrose was the culprit. Why should the directors steal their own stock? They were both wealthy men, brothers whose integrity, to say the least of it, was unquestioned.

It looked as though Barrow had been quietly selling the shirtings to underground markets and that Sammy Judge was one of the receivers. Posing as a remnant dealer, he could easily dispose of the spoils.

Faddiman went all over the town, questioning Barrow's friends, associates and casuals who might have seen him about the mill after hours. Nothing. In the mill, among the hands, he also met with a blank. Some of them might have been implicated in the robberies. If they were, they kept their mouths shut and behaved above suspicion.

So Faddiman found himself facing an unanswerable question. Who killed Ambrose Barrow? And why, in heaven's name, was he disguised?

The source of the grease-paint and moustache was easily found. Barrow was producer or something to the dramatic society at the church. He had taken the materials from the make-up box. His idea presumably was to make himself unrecognisable if anyone saw him entering or leaving the mill at unusual hours.

Finally, Sammy Judge recovered sufficiently to tell a more or less coherent tale. He had, from time to time, purchased what he called remnants from the mill. They had been delivered to him at the warehouse on Saturday nights after the market closed. Nothing wrong with that, was there? It was a perfectly normal transaction for spot cash. On the night in question Sammy had called for his usual bundle and found Barrow lying hideously dead in the warehouse. He went off his head again, protesting his honesty and innocence when the police pressed him for details and they had to shut him up in his room.

Faddiman was inclined to believe Sammy's story. The little spiv's physique precluded his ever succeeding in strangling a man of Barrow's size and strength. Judge was therefore retained under lock and key pending his recovery, which was very convenient, for they couldn't properly charge him even with theft, to say nothing of murder, without fuller evidence.

Barrow was a married man and his wife was prominent in local circles. She took the blow badly but could give no help in solving the problem. Her husband often went to the mill after hours. That was natural. He was heart and soul in his job. She could offer no explanation of his make-up at the time of his death. It must have been put on at the office, she said, for she had never even seen the grease-paint and whiskers at home.

A month passed and the police were no nearer. Inspector Faddiman had to confess himself beaten.

Then, Sammy Judge hanged himself on his braces and, to mend matters, the local newspaper in an ambiguous account of the inquest, somehow gave the impression that the spiv's guilty, murderous conscience had caused the suicide. Benny Judge sued them for libel.

The Chief Constable, almost as demented by events as the deceased spiv, sent for Scotland Yard.

## CHAPTER THREE

# THE WOMAN IN THE PILL-BOX HAT

“DON’T look round,” said Inspector Faddiman to Littlejohn after he got out of the train and they had shaken hands. “There’s a woman followed me here and I think she’s after you. Mrs. Barrow, wife of the murdered man....”

She was standing under the bridge leading from the up to the down line, patiently waiting, her eyes on the two officers, her long fingers screwing a handkerchief into a ball. She had a fixed purpose in mind and ignored all the bustle and noise going on around her. She was tall, dark and slim, dressed in black from head to foot. Coat and skirt, shoes, gloves and even black stockings. Her hat was like a tall, inverted black pill-box. A good-looking woman but pale and strained from grief and worry.

Muttering to himself, Faddiman took Littlejohn’s bag and they elbowed their way through the crowd. Mrs. Barrow followed, leaving the astonished ticket-collector with his hand outstretched for her ticket without even so much as a platform-ticket or a look in his direction.

Mrs. Barrow caught them up on the sloping station approach. She ignored Faddiman.

“You’re the man from Scotland Yard, aren’t you?”

It was very embarrassing. Passers-by were turning to look at the new arrival. Already the news had gone round like wildfire that a Scotland Yard Inspector was taking over the spiv case.

Now there looked like being a scene as well.

“My mother and I want to offer you the hospitality of our home while you’re here. After all, you’ve come to clear my late husband’s name. It’s the least we can do.... And the local hotels are so poor....”

She was calm and unmoved by the situation. She’d a set purpose in mind and nothing was going to deflect her from it.

Faddiman was still muttering to himself.

“Look here, Mrs. Barrow, please don’t pester us any more. I’ve already told you we’re doing our best and there’s no good will come from you interfering. I’ve booked a room for the Inspector at *The Queen Anne*....”



Faddiman was getting ratty. The woman was never off the doorstep of the police station, worrying him and asking for progress in clearing her husband's name and finding his murderer. She'd even been after the Chief Constable and caused a scene at a house-party he was giving. The local M.P., too, got a letter from her three times a week. It was sickening....

They were walking three-abreast down the narrow, cobblestoned main street. The woman was almost trotting to keep up with the regulation strides of the two Inspectors, both of whom were flushed with embarrassment. Littlejohn was torn between listening to Mrs. Barrow's arguments, taking in the atmosphere of the one-eyed town, and turning over in his mind the idea of where he was going to lodge.

They still had tumbledown, rattling old trams running through the place, there was a boiler-shop riveting like mad somewhere nearby, and there was a noisy open-air market in progress on a square off the main street. You couldn't hear yourself speak for the hullabaloo. Littlejohn, on the outside of the pavement, could just see Faddiman's and the woman's mouths opening and closing contentiously. People passing were all eyes and kept pointing at them. Littlejohn felt like breaking away at the next pub and having a drink, leaving the pair of them to thrash it out.

The woman wasn't going to give in. She followed them into the police station and through to Faddiman's office. She was very composed about it all, but firm, and, after she'd stated her case, by insulting the cooking, service, proprietor, customers and morals of *The Queen Anne*, there didn't seem to be any alternative but to accept her offer.

It was amazing. Littlejohn couldn't help admiring the grit of Mrs. Barrow. Right in the lion's den, too. Faddiman was a formidable opponent. He looked like a policeman. He wasn't far from retiring age and was tall, impressive, grey haired and authoritative. His small grey moustache bristled with determination. But the woman stuck it out.

She must have been about thirty-five. She was tall and big-boned, but instead of putting on weight as such people usually do later in life, she had kept lithe and slim. Her clothes were obviously the handiwork of a small-town tailor. "Mourning orders within twenty-four hours...." Properly turned-out, she would have been quite distinguished and attractive. And the pill-box hat was just ridiculous. She had rather a long, delicate face, and this, topping the lot, elongated it still further to an absurd degree. Littlejohn prided himself a bit on his taste in ladies' hats. This one took the biscuit....

“Could you send the Inspector’s bag round, then?”

She gave an address to Faddiman, who almost blew up. There was no limit to her nerve!

Littlejohn was sick of it and thought it best to intervene.

“Very good of you, Mrs. Barrow, I’m sure, but I must be independent during this investigation. I can’t very well stay at the home of the murdered man, can I...?”

“And why not? There’s every reason why you should. I could help. You are working on his side, aren’t you?”

This sort of thing could go on for ever!

“Definitely, Mrs. Barrow. But you must appreciate that I must be free to choose my own lodgings and operate as I wish....”

“And there was a nice beefsteak for your tea, too. I got it specially from the butchers....”

“I’ll bet you did,” thought Littlejohn and, at length, finding himself alone with the now speechless Faddiman, he relieved his feelings in roars of laughter.

Faddiman didn’t think it funny at all.

“I’m fed up with that damned woman. Never been off our doorstep since the case opened. I’m sure if she’d known your name beforehand, she’d have come up to London to fix things up before you left. Did you want to stay at her place?”

“Not on your life....”

All the same, it might have had its advantages. A lot of inside atmosphere and information. Freedom from the small-town “commercial”. And there was a nice beefsteak for his tea....

But it just couldn’t be done.

• • • • •

The police constable took Littlejohn’s bag to *The Queen Anne*. He walked self-consciously, carrying his load with ease and looking a bit put-out. He wasn’t used to being a porter....

The street descended sharply to the town centre. Then, there was a stone bridge beneath which sped a river in spate. The water boiled and swished round the piers of the arches, carrying branches of trees and other rubbish with it. The constable’s nose began to run and he furtively wiped it on the

back of his hand. People followed with their eyes the progress of the two policemen, turning round in the street and peeping from shop-windows and doors.

The hotel was near the centre of the town. A poor sort of place, badly in need of a coat of paint and with a gloomy interior. The landlord, at the sight of the new arrivals, detached himself from a party of playboys drinking at the bar and greeted them. He was a small, fat, middle-aged man, with a bald head, a large moustache waxed to points, and an aggressive air born of lack of confidence. He was in his shirt sleeves.

“We’ll do our best to make you comfortable....”

He spoke from one side of his mouth as though imparting a secret.

“And by the way, had Mrs. Barrow been after you, sir, trying to get you to stop with her...?”

“She did offer hospitality.... Why?”

“She’s been round here, sir. Told me you weren’t coming after all. Good as implied the place wasn’t good enough for you. She’s got a nerve. It was always good enough for her till she got married to Barrow. Then she got big ideas about herself....”

“What do you mean?”

“She used to come here with her boy friends regular at one time. Quite one of the girls of the town in her day was Flo. Harrison. That was her name before she wed Barrow.”

“What did she do in those days?”

“Secretary to the mayor of the town. Corporation official. Fancied herself, too. Came across Barrow when Mr. Fenning was mayor. Barrow being secretary of the mill and her being secretary of the millowner, they got quite a lot together. Though why she married him, I don’t know. She could have done better, for she was a good-looker and no mistake.”

“What sort of a man was Barrow?”

“I’d describe him as a bit of a nonentity myself. Though I didn’t know much about him. He came here sometimes to dinners but wasn’t what you’d call a regular client, like.”

“Why were you surprised at his marrying Flo. Harrison, did you say she was called...?”

“Yes. Weeeell, can’t hardly put my finger on it. Let’s say she wasn’t his sort.”

The landlord looked uneasy and eager to get away. There seemed to be something he didn't care to say. The arrival of a customer relieved the situation.

"Good afternoon, sir...."

The landlord was all over the man. Littlejohn tried to size up the newcomer.

He wasn't the small-town type at all. Tall, well-setup, with a head of curly grey hair and a fine, aquiline, clean-shaven face. He stood out among the local ragtag and bobtail drinking round the bar and they immediately became deferential.

"Good day to you, Mr. Fenning...."

So this was Fenning!

He moved among the crowd with ease, almost grace, compared with their own gaucheries. Neither his suit nor his accent were local products. He'd been well-educated somewhere and you could tell it as soon as he entered the place.

"The usual, please, Spencer."

He had a word for everyone, kindly but not familiar. The sort you wouldn't take any liberties with.

"How's your mother, Mary?"

That was for the barmaid.

"Better, sir, thank you. She'll be about in a day or two."

"I'm glad...."

The landlord handed Fenning a glass of sherry.

Littlejohn asked for the same. The landlord gave him a dirty look.

"It's all right, Spencer. No need to keep it all for me."

It was excellent sherry, too. Fenning smiled at Littlejohn.

"Like it? Spencer gets it specially for me. By the way, you aren't by any chance the detective from Scotland Yard?"

"Yes, sir."

"Forgive the curiosity. I'm as big a gossip as the rest. It's all round the town you're here...."

"Yes, I seem to have caused a bit of commotion."

"Well, I hope you meet with success. The Barrow case has certainly baffled our own men. I wish you well.... And now I must be off...."

With a wave of the hand to them all, Fenning hurried to the expensive black coupé standing in front of the pub and drove off.

“So that’s Mr. Fenning, Spencer? He’s got good taste in sherry, to say the least of it.”

“Yes, sir. A proper toff. Got good taste in a lot more things, too. He’s given a few good pictures to the local art gallery. Not that many goes to see them, but there they are.”

“A local man? I mean, born in the neighbourhood?”

“Yes. Family’s lived here for generations. Fine place they have just outside the town. But Mr. Andrew’s father saw to it that his sons knew a bit about the world before they settled down at the mills. They was educated at public schools and Oxford and then went abroad a lot. Look at Mr. Andrew, now. Well-groomed, smart, good-mannered. You know as soon as he comes in he wants the best and nothin’ else’ll do.”

“And Mrs. Barrow was his secretary?”

“Yes....”

The landlord laughed wheezily.

“Yes. He wanted the best there, too, and saw that he got it. She was the best-looking girl in the town when he took her on. But she was a bit poor class. No taste or style....”

“And Mr. Fenning soon put that right....”

“He did. Though to see her now, you’d hardly believe it. Since Barrow was killed she’s been dressed in black. I guess she thinks she ought to pipe down a bit in view of all the circumstances. But before, she was the classiest girl in town.”

“Yes? And yet she married Barrow, who, you say hadn’t much about him.”

“Well, she could hardly marry Mr. Andrew, could she? He’s married already. Not that we see much of Mrs. Fenning. She won’t live here and has a flat in London and goes in for a good time. I wonder what Mr. Andrew thinks when he sees Flo. in her mourning get-up. I bet he thinks she’s slipped a bit....”

The landlord laughed another spiteful, wheezy laugh.

Wretched little runt, thought Littlejohn, who’d taken a bit of a fancy for Fenning.

“Did Mr. Fenning and Flo. get about a lot together, then?”

“Yes, quite a bit before she married Barrow. All the town knew about it, but everybody disliked Mrs. Fenning for calling Brockfield an awful dump and refusing to be seen in it. So they didn’t mind. But the thing stopped

being free-and-easy, like, after she married. This is a small town and however much you carry on on the Q.T., you mustn't do it in public. Get me?"

"Yes, I get you."

"I think Flo. and Mr. Andrew was always straight and above board. And they've kept it so. The Fennings was Barrow's employers and he had a good job with them. I've heard of him and Flo. dining at the Hall quite a lot. I wonder what Barrow felt like among all that silver and cut-glass, with the fine pictures on the walls and priceless old furniture. I've been up there a time or two. It's lovely. I guess Mr. Andrew educated Flo. up to that standard, but as for Barrow.... I bet he was a fish out of water and no mistake. You'd only to see the way he wore his clothes to know that. He once came here in a dinner-suit. Somebody mistook him for a waiter...."

The landlord was set for talking all the rest of the day and night. Somebody had paid for a drink or two for him and he was half-seas-over already. Littlejohn guessed it wouldn't be long before the licence changed hands. Probably he was drinking away all the profits and more besides.

The telephone bell rang in a box at the end of the bar.

"Is Inspector Littlejohn here? Inspector Littlejohn...."

Everybody looked up and a score or more pairs of eyes fixed themselves curiously on Littlejohn. He took the call in the box and the eyes remained fixed on him as though trying to read his thoughts.

It was Mrs. Barrow on the telephone.

"I say, Inspector, it seems a shame to waste this good steak. Even if you are staying at *The Queen Anne*, you might like a meal here. I can promise a better spread than old Spencer's any day. Will you come? I can perhaps tell you something useful, too, whilst you're here."

"But I've got to see Inspector Faddiman almost at once. I've only just got here to settle in...."

"Ring him up and tell him you'll be a bit late."

Littlejohn sighed. Of all the determined women he'd ever met!

"Very well, Mrs. Barrow, thank you...."

"The address is forty-one Farleigh Grove. About five minutes' walk from where you are now. The landlord will tell you how to get there. Or, I could walk down and show you the way."

"No, no, thanks. I'll find it...."

He didn't ask the landlord, however. He'd had enough of Spencer for the time being. It was raining so he took a taxi.

"Chuckin' the country's money around," said the driver when he got back among his pals in the local cabmen's shelter. "Gettin' me out in all that rain for a three minutes' trip and a bob fare. Ruddy shame, I call it...."

## CHAPTER FOUR



## STEAK FOR TEA

THE taxi was out of the town in a couple of minutes. This was the suburban part of Brockfield, where the clerks, officials, prosperous traders and better-class artisans lived. Small detached or semi-detached houses, each with its formal little garden, so many to the acre, as laid down in some planning scheme or other. Many of the avenues had not yet been adopted and paved and traffic had churned them up badly. The taxi bounced over potholes which the rain had filled with liquid resembling cold tea.

The afternoon light was fading and added a dismal air to the scene. Electric lamps with naked bulbs, posted here and there on the estate, had been switched on by time-clocks and their light shone weak and desperate against the remaining daylight.

They halted at a small detached house in the middle of a road. Small cars stood at the gates of other villas, as though their owners had brought them out and parked them there just to show they owned them. Number forty-one Farleigh Grove was like all the rest. Box hedge, wooden gate, with "Forty-One" in full on a plate made of the individual letters held together in a frame. A few dripping poplars and bushes surrounding a small patch of lawn with bedraggled and neglected flower-beds at the edge. There were heavy green curtains at the windows and on the window-sill inside, two glass vases of flowers with a plaster figure of a Greek athlete between.

Littlejohn paid off his taxi and walked along the crazy-paved path to the front door. The bell was a clockwork thing which you wind up by turning it round and round inside.

"Will you please come in? My daughter won't be a minute."

Littlejohn guessed that it was Mrs. Barrow's mother. A little, grey-haired, faded woman, with bright inquisitive dark eyes. She spoke with a trace of some dialect or other. She was serious and a bit overawed by her visitor. There was an air of refinement about her worried face and you could see from whom her daughter had inherited the delicate arched nose and regular features.

As he entered the house, Littlejohn was enveloped in a warm smell of cooking. Steak and chips for tea, with something connected with hot custard to follow! Upstairs, you could hear someone, presumably Flo. Barrow, hurrying here and there, dressing herself up specially for her visitor.

The passage was gloomy and the old lady switched on a light, a wrought-iron lantern with orange-coloured glass. The first thing that caught Littlejohn's eye was a fine little etching hanging beside a modern oak hall-wardrobe. The rest of the furniture was nondescript. Mock-jacobean umbrella stand, a small dinner waggon with a plate glass top, and a green and black carpet.

"Let me hang up your hat and coat...."

Littlejohn handed them over with a smile, whereat the old lady thawed and smiled back. Her face, relieved of strain, assumed quite an air of distinction. The hall-wardrobe was chock-full but she managed, by ramming the contents tight, to find room for Littlejohn's clothes.

"In here, please...."

The old lady indicated an easy chair near the fire and bustled off to hurry along her daughter. You could hear her climbing the stairs....

Littlejohn looked round the room. To him, it indicated a struggle of tastes. Flo. Barrow on one side and her husband, and perhaps her mother, too, on the other. Flo. influenced by Fenning, a man of the world and by all accounts, a connoisseur; and Ambrose Barrow, a philistine who played the organ at chapel, looked like a waiter when he put on his evening clothes, and was content with the standards of small-town life. You could imagine the tussle when they set up house.

There was an enormous, dim oil-painting on the wall. It dominated the room from a heavy gilt frame. Probably Barrow had been very proud of it and hoped that one day some expert would proclaim it a masterpiece and buy it for a fabulous sum. It completely overshadowed two small, exquisite woodcuts, which perhaps Fenning had given to Flo. at some time or other. The carpet was fitted and of rust colour, which, toning after a fashion with the mahogany furniture, brought out none of the colour or lustre of it. Blue would have been better. The piano was a good one. Barrow had been a musician and presumably used it a lot. There were still two or three oratorios lying on top. You could divide the room in two. Furniture, heavy and unimaginative, with carpets and fittings by Barrow. Odds and ends, like ornaments, by his wife. A conglomeration of warring styles....

Then, Littlejohn realised that he might be doing Barrow an injustice. Perhaps he hadn't been responsible for the set-up at all. Maybe, Flo.'s taste was reflected in the main scheme and Fenning had merely imposed a little here and there by an odd gift or two. His education of the small-town girl

might not have gone very far. She might have been too stupid from the start....

“So, we meet again, Inspector.”

She was still wearing black, but it wasn't a mourning order this time. It was a model frock, caught at the neck by an exquisite opal brooch and she wore fine silk stockings and shoes which set off the lot. Her dark hair shone under the lamplight and her make-up, down to the very shade of her lipstick, was just right. Littlejohn's runaway imagination saw the finger of Fenning in it all....

They shook hands. Mrs. Barrow looked quite at ease, but she seemed to have arranged everything beforehand.

“Sherry?”

She produced a bottle and two glasses. The glasses were poor; the sherry excellent. It was Fenning's favourite brand! Again the conflict of tastes. A really fine drink served in glasses bought from a sixpenny store before the war!!

Outside, you could hear the old woman bustling around, rattling plates, spreading cups and saucers, rushing in and out of the kitchen, looking after the meal. The nice steak....

“I wanted to talk with you before you started your investigation, Inspector.... But, excuse me, I didn't ask if you found *The Queen Anne* all right.”

She smiled a bit spitefully, knowing the answer she would get.

“Passable, that's all, Mrs. Barrow. I don't know what the food's like, but the place strikes me as decidedly dim.”

“I thought it would. However.... What do you think of Brockfield?”

“Well....”

“A bit dim, too? Don't bother to be polite. I think it's a dreadful place. Nobody....”

“It's ready....”

The old lady's head appeared round the door and vanished again.

“This way....”

The dining-room was just the same. No-account furniture and a few surprises. For example, the Wedgwood willow service and the fine china cups and saucers.

The steak was served, garnished with chips and grilled tomatoes. A fine, white tablecloth, silver tea-service, spotless napkins. Flo.'s mother, Mrs.

Harrison, didn't look comfortable. Either she was a bit scared of Littlejohn or else she wasn't used to a show such as her daughter was putting on.

"Will you have a bottle of beer, Inspector?"

As Flo. Barrow went to the kitchen to fetch the drink her mother shook her head and clicked her tongue against her teeth.

"I never touch drink," she said testily. "Neither did Flo. until she...."

And then Mrs. Harrison stopped.

• • • • •

They were sitting in the lounge again, taking coffee. Mrs. Barrow had offered Littlejohn brandy and cigars, but he had refused the drink and was smoking his pipe.

Impossible to believe that but a short while ago, the master of the place had been strangled. It was so quiet and settled. You'd have thought that trouble was safely shut outside.

"Had your husband any enemies, Mrs. Barrow? Anyone who might have wished him ill or borne him any grudge?"

The same old question and the same old answer.

"No...."

She was sitting with her legs crossed, smoking a cigarette and staring in the fire. The look she gave Littlejohn as she answered was untroubled. Outside, her mother was washing up in the kitchen.

"What was he doing at the mill at that hour?"

"According to the evidence at the inquest, he was there selling some oddments of cloth to the dealer who could only come for them on Saturday night."

"Was he in charge of that kind of thing? One would have thought the warehouseman...."

"Yes. But with cash passing for the transaction, my husband probably wished to lock it in the safe. Only he and the directors had keys."

"It seems a bit strange, though. Surely Mr. Barrow wasn't in charge of the warehouse."

"You're thinking of the story that my husband was dishonestly selling the company's goods, aren't you? I won't believe that. There must be some satisfactory explanation. He was too honest. There wasn't a straighter man anywhere. The insinuation is scandalous and that's why I hope you'll do

better than the local police and clear his name at the same time as find his murderer.”

Flo. Barrow’s cheeks flamed and she grew excited. But she showed no sign of grief. Merely indignation.

“What is this matter about his being disguised... made up with the dramatic society’s grease-paints and false-hair? Was he an actor, then?”

Mrs. Barrow looked ready to laugh.

“Ambrose an actor? Not at all. His association with the church dramatics was as a musician. He ran a little piano quartette which played between the acts. He couldn’t have taken a part to save his life....”

She said it almost contemptuously.

“Why?”

“He wasn’t that kind. Stolid, unimaginative. He was a good musician technically, but quite uninspired....”

Littlejohn looked at the woman facing him. Good-looking, passionate, well-dressed, with a measure of surface sophistication and probably boundless ambition.

Yet, she married Barrow. Unimaginative, stodgy, provincial to his finger-tips. A real, self-satisfied bore. You could imagine him coming home, sitting by the fireside in his slippers, playing his piano, talking about his day at the office. Now and then going out to choir practice, or to rehearse his little orchestra. And sometimes he’d go upstairs and put on his evening clothes and attend some local function. And he’d come down looking like a waiter!

“What was your husband doing disguised then?”

“I don’t know. If it weren’t so tragic, it would be comic.”

Littlejohn wondered what was going on in this woman’s mind. What was under the cynical show of case-hardening she assumed?

“What did you do when your husband went out practising his music and such like, Mrs. Barrow?”

“I stayed in or visited friends....”

“You didn’t share his musical interests then?”

“The church choir? No, thank you. They didn’t want me there.”

“Why?”

She shrugged her shoulders. Littlejohn knew. Probably there was a commotion and a lot of talk at the chapel when Barrow married the girl he did. Not the chapel sort.... Decidedly not.

“What happened on the day he died?”

“We had a meal and he went to the church to play for a special service. I had a cold so stayed at home. Otherwise, I’d probably have called to see friends. The next thing was the telephone message from the police.”

“Had your husband been in touch with anybody from the dramatic society that night? I mean, could he have picked up his disguise on the way?”

“No. That was fully gone into. There wasn’t anything else on at the church but the special service. It wouldn’t have done for things to clash, would it?”

“Who’s in charge of the dramatic society?”

“A Mrs. Allen is secretary. She lives at Albion Place in the town. She may be able to tell you more.”

So it went on. Just ordinary conversation, as though they were discussing something in which they both weren’t vitally interested.

“Now, Mrs. Barrow, please tell me if your husband’s finances were in order at the time of his death.”

“Quite in order. If you mean, had he been spending a lot, or presumably putting a lot away from ill-gotten gains, you’re quite mistaken. Ambrose was a thrifty man, who put by a fixed sum from his income every year. His life policies were all in order and his capital regular. No large sums, no large outgoings.”

“Thank you.”

“May I ask what he earned?”

Flo. didn’t look very surprised at the question.

“About eight hundred a year. We managed all right on it.”

An etching hung on one wall. It put all the rest of the pictures in the house to shame. Littlejohn pointed to it.

“Was that your choice... or Mr. Barrow’s?”

“Mine. He didn’t bother much about pictures. Do you like it?”

Littlejohn rose and looked carefully at it.

“Beautiful. I won’t ask what it cost. It’s a Whistler, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And it cost five shillings.”

Littlejohn opened his eyes wide.

“How?”

“Among a lot of junk at a local auction-sale. A friend of mine saw it and bought it. It was among a stack of stuff which was being sold merely as

wood and glass. My friend gave it to me.”

“Did she know she was getting a Whistler?”

“He did.”

No need to ask who *he* was.

Littlejohn was beginning to feel a bit disgusted with developments. He thought about Faddiman, too. What would the Inspector be saying? Here was a Scotland Yard man down to help in the investigation and they hadn’t, as yet, got their heads together and discussed the problem. Was it going to turn out to be a sordid little triangular affair? Two males fighting over a female and one slaughtering the other!

Mrs. Harrison had finished in the kitchen and could be heard pottering about outside, making up her mind whether or not to enter the room.

“Shall I make up the fire, Flo?”

“I must be going.”

Littlejohn rose to greet the old lady and knocked out his pipe in the fire.

“You’re not going yet, are you? I thought maybe you’d have some more questions to ask me....”

“What kind of questions, Mrs. Barrow?”

“I don’t know. But I thought....”

She had asked him up to size him up! That was it. Did she wish to know what kind of an ally she had...? Or was it adversary?

The old lady seemed to think that some apology was due for her daughter’s calmness.

“It’s been a sad blow to Flo., sir. She’s not herself at all. Since Ambrose was taken....”

“Please be quiet, mother. The Inspector knows all about it.”

Littlejohn looked at Barrow’s things, still scattered here and there. Furniture, piano, heavy books in shelves on each side of the fireplace, some pipes in a rack, the oratorios on the piano. It was as if he were still alive, had just gone out to choir-practice, and would soon be back.

“How long have you lived with your daughter, Mrs. Harrison?”

“I have my own house. I just came to keep her company after Ambrose.... She couldn’t be alone, could she?”

“No, she couldn’t....”

“Have the police any clues? Any suspicions?”

Flo. tried to say it casually, but there was strain in her voice she couldn’t hide.

So that was it! The meeting at the station, the pestering and badgering of Faddiman, the insistence on Littlejohn's early visit. She was afraid of something.

"No, Mrs. Barrow. We haven't a thing to guide us. But sooner or later, we'll find what it was all about..."

They saw him to the door and the pair of them stood there, framed in the hall light, until Littlejohn had walked almost to the end of the avenue. It was still raining hard, but the Inspector preferred to walk. He turned up the collar of his raincoat, pulled down the brim of his hat and struggled against the wind and rain till he reached the police station.



## CHAPTER FIVE

## HAMLET IN MODERN DRESS

LITTLEJOHN found Penelope Allen attending a rehearsal of the BAPS; Brockfield Amateur Players, to give it in full. After a brief interview with Faddiman, who seemed quite resigned to the strange ways of Scotland Yard detectives, he had called at Mrs. Allen's home and been told she was at a rehearsal at the school behind the Oddfellows' Arms, of which we have already said quite a lot.

The Inspector was anxious to learn a bit more about the murdered man and his activities and also, if he could, to get to the bottom of the strange affair of the disguise.

The room was in darkness, except for the stage which was brightly lit and full of activity. They were soon to give *Hamlet* in modern dress. A tall young man was occupied in alternately dealing with the gravediggers and quarrelling with the producer. The latter was sitting just below the stage on a chair tilted on two legs and was in a perpetual state of convulsion. Now waving his arms, now yelling abuse or instruction, or again mounting the stage in a single bound and excitedly showing them all how to do it.

The gathering seemed divided into two parts. One lot of earnest actors sat silent and immersed in their art, waiting their turns; the other formed a clique of frolicking chatterers whom the producer kept abusing and ordering to shut up without much effect.

One pretty dark-haired girl, cast for Ophelia in a blond wig, was flirting and displaying herself among a group of young bloods, some of whom pounced upon her and pawed her from time to time without being rebuffed. A sort of mass courtship. Like a lot of dogs....

"What's *he* want?" somebody said in a loud affected voice as Littlejohn entered. The rehearsals were private and the show was to be sprung as a surprise on the lucky people of Brockfield.

Somebody found Penelope, who was not in the play, but busy preparing tickets, and brought her to the Inspector. On her way she gathered up a forlorn-looking man who had been sitting alone, apparently meditating in the dark. Penelope Allen had just been married and this was Cuthbert, the lucky one.

It was difficult to see properly in the dim light at the back of the hall, but Mrs. Allen was grotesquely dressed. Arty-crafty—livid jumper, with

weals across it which reminded you of astigmatism, homespun shapeless skirt, Russian boots and a belt decorated with horse-brasses. The latter was her own idea....

Cuthbert was taking the ghost in *Hamlet* and he looked the part. He was tall and pale, he sagged from the waist and wore a limp thin moustache on his Slavonic face. He had glasses, too, in heavy black frames, and couldn't see a foot without them. This was a source of great anxiety to the producer, for you couldn't very well have a ghost in spectacles and Mr. Allen's brief part therefore, was a kind of game of blind-man's buff. In his worst nightmares, Mr. Blight, the producer, saw the ghost walking right off the stage and mingling dimly with the audience on the night of the show.

Penelope interviewed Littlejohn in a corner and in whispers. Cuthbert stood patiently by, like a camel, and whether or not he was taking it all in, he alone knew. He seemed stunned, as though weeks ago somebody had knocked him on the head and he had suddenly recovered consciousness to find himself tied to Penelope for life.

"Did Mr. Barrow take an active interest in the society?" asked Littlejohn.

Mrs. Allen was a curious shape. A long body of tightly braced bones, with no waistline; thin legs with huge feet; square, flat face; pink-and-white, good complexion; and a little nose like a snout. Her eyes were blue and grew round with innocence at the time when she fired her most deadly shafts.

"My husband," she said, introducing the ghost to Littlejohn.

"Yes," said Cuthbert, like a schoolboy answering roll-call.

"Yes, Mr. Barrow was interested, but only in the music. He ran a tiny orchestra which played between the acts. He used to call at rehearsals from time to time. Mr. Blight,... that's our producer, the man on the chair, there... Mr. Blight is keen on the right music and of course, they got together...."

The voice purred on and on.

"Didn't they, darling?"

"Yes," said the ghost.

"Had he any particular friends here?"

The purring stopped, the large blue eyes sought Littlejohn's face.

"What do you mean, Inspector?"

The tone of the voice was enough. The jovial cat getting ready for the mouse.

"I mean, I'm anxious to know all I can about Mr. Barrow and his interests. Had he any particular friends in this society who can tell me something about them?"

"Oh. Oh, yes. He was a great friend of Mr. Menstone, the tall one over there by the dark girl. She's the younger sister of Miss Lackland, who was violinist in the little orchestra. They might be able to tell you something. Eh, darling?"

The ghost didn't respond.

"Darling!!"

"Yes."

There was an intermission in the rehearsal and the chattering groups were now at it fortissimo. They spoke a language of their own. Everything was "wizard," "smashing," "dim," "lousy," or "putrid." And their ways of life seemed to consist of "beetling," "stooging," "staggering," "waffling" and "blowing." Like talking in code!

Mr. Blight was trying to tell the first gravedigger how to do it. A tall fellow with projecting teeth shook hands over his head in approval of Hamlet and shouted "Wizard prang!"

"Mr. Barrow was very friendly with Miss Lackland, the one in the band, I mean, not our one...."

The purring and the large blue eyes came into operation again.

"Who's in charge of the make-up here, Mrs. Allen?"

"Mr. Liptrot, the one with the producer. He's good."

"Where's Penelope?" bawled somebody.

"Here. I'm just busy. Won't be long."

Nobody seemed particularly interested in Littlejohn and his affairs. There were so many interviews of one kind and another going on in dark corners. One more or less didn't make much difference.

"Were you rehearsing on the night Mr. Barrow met his death?"

"No. There was something on at the church and we couldn't hire the hall. Damn' shame. Beastly of them. As if we wanted to go to their hymn-singing...."

"Does Mr. Liptrot keep the make-up box himself?"

"Yes...."

“Perhaps I’d better have a word with him. Do you mind sending him to me, please?”

“Don’t you want me any more?”

The voice was plaintive. No doubt, Mrs. Allen knew quite a lot more and could surmise even more than that. Still, that wouldn’t be evidence, and may be she was on her guard with the police.

“No, thanks.”

“I’ll tell Reggie then.... Come on, dearest....”

“Yes.”

They faded out and materialised again in the middle of the group surrounding Miss Lackland. Penelope, in their own idiotic *patois*, told Reggie to “toddle along and bow-wow” with Littlejohn, and gave the rest the “gen”. All eyes turned in the Inspector’s direction. A tall, fair-haired youngster, with huge nose and a quiff over one eye, detached himself with apparent reluctance and ambled, hands in pockets, to Littlejohn. He looked like a toucan.

“Did you want me, sir?”

“You Mr. Menstone?”

“Yes....”

“I’m in charge of the Barrow murder case.”

“Still at it?”

“If you like to put it that way, yes. I’m trying to find out something about Mr. Barrow’s movements before his death. Can you help me?”

“In what way?”

“You were his friend, I gather?”

“Yes. I was one of his pupils. Perhaps his favourite pupil.”

He said it facetiously.

“You were familiar with his movements?”

“Some of them. He taught me music and now and then I played the church organ for him when he wanted a break.”

“You attended his choir rehearsals?”

“At odd times. By way of experience and out of regard for him. I don’t go to the church, nor am I in the choir.”

Menstone didn’t look straight at you when he spoke, but over your left shoulder. As though you had a wraith by your side.

“Jolly good show,” yelled somebody to Hamlet and the producer gave the signal for a start again by shouting “Break it up and get crackin’.”

Penelope could be seen leading Cuthbert off to play his ghost. The rest of the gang muttered and giggled derisively....

“Look, Mr. Menstone. I’m anxious to find out who killed Ambrose Barrow. I want to know all about him. Did he get on well with his wife?”

“Nothing like putting it straight,” said Menstone to the wraith. “No, he didn’t. Couldn’t expect him to. Everybody was surprised when he married her. Poles apart....”

“In what way?”

“This is a bit embarrassing, you know. I shouldn’t be talking like this of a dead friend....”

“He was strangled, remember.”

“I’m not forgetting, sir. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have got a word out of me. To cut a long story short, Barrow was always a decent sort of bloke. A bit potty on his music, that’s all. Wrapped up in it, in fact. His wife, Flo., on the other hand, didn’t know one note from another. Didn’t want to, either.”

“Still, that’s not enough....”

“I know, I know. But Flo. was a high-flyer. Liked a good time with the boys, spent above her husband’s income, and her name was mud among the decent folk of this town before she married Ambrose. Got among a crowd much above her and tried to ape their ways.”

“The Fenning lot?”

“I’m saying nothing about *who*. You must get that elsewhere. I’m not mixing myself in it....”

“You may have to if you’ve got the information, Mr. Menstone. The inquest was only adjourned. You might find yourself in the box making a statement in public under oath....”

“I don’t care. I won’t be bullied.”

“Nobody’s trying to bully you. Was Barrow fond of the ladies?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’ve nothing more to say.”

“Very well. Please ask Miss Lackland to have a word with me.”

“Here, if you think....”

“Do as I ask you, please.”

Menstone went and brought Miss Lackland, somewhat to the consternation of her many vociferous admirers, and stayed beside her with Littlejohn.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Miss Lackland, but I’m investigating the death of Mr. Barrow. He was a great friend of your sister’s, I believe....”

The girl was good-looking and knew it. Oval face, clear complexion, fine dark hair, a straight nose and large brown eyes. She fixed the eyes on Littlejohn in studied appeal. With this lot, thought Littlejohn, you don’t know when they’re putting on an act and when they’re not. Better at the police-station in the cold light of day.

“I won’t have her bullied,” said Menstone to the invisible man on Littlejohn’s left.

“Thanks, Alex....”

Had Littlejohn only known it, he’d just played cupid. Vera Lackland had been wondering which to take of the eight doglike admirers who pursued her everywhere. Alex’s bravery in the face of police, tipped the beam. Vera felt she’d be safe for life with Alex. They were engaged by week-end!

“Mr. Barrow was a friend of your elder sister?”

Vera recovered from the first shock of Eros’s arrow.

“Yes. She played in his quartette....”

“I’d like a word with her sometime.”

Alex edged closer to Littlejohn, as though about to fight to the death for Vera and all her relations. Littlejohn took it all in with a wry smile. He wondered whether Alex would strike the first blow at him or at the fellow on the left.

“The Hawthorns, Highley Crescent, is where we live. She’s at work during the day, of course.”

“Where does she work?”

“Fennings’ Mill. She’s cashier there.”

“Thank you, Miss Lackland.”

“Will that be all?”

Menstone was still looming protectively over Vera, pouting with displeasure and self-assertiveness, like an angry turkey-cock round one of his threatened hens.

“Yes, thanks. I’d just like a word with Mr. Liptrot, if you’ll be so good. Thank you both....”

There must have been some intonation of goodwill in Littlejohn’s voice, for they both turned and smiled before they went. Menstone beamed at the wraith and Vera flashed her eloquent eyes straight at the Inspector. They

went off together to get Liptrot and for the remainder of the evening, the rest of the suitors were left in the cold.

Mr. Liptrot was greeted by shouts of laughter as he crossed the room to join Littlejohn. He was the funny man of the society. A perfect scream. He was a stocky, slightly bowlegged chap, studying to become an architect. He was a keen amateur actor, although he stammered when excited. On the stage he never showed a sign of his infirmity; off it, he sometimes seemed to chase his words all over his mouth before ejecting them.

Liptrot faced Littlejohn with half a beard on his face. Hence the mirth. He was a make-up maniac. Always at it with his grease-paints and whiskers. He had just been inventing a phenomenal first gravedigger.

“Did you want me?”

A goatee beard climbing up one side of his face; the other side clean-shaven, as yet. He looked to have the two halves of different heads glued together and stuck on his thick body.

Littlejohn asked his questions.

“Oh, yes. I guess Barrow would have access to the make-up box, if he wanted. It’s kept, as a rule, in a little room off the stage. I bring it for dress-rehearsal and there it lies, till I tidy it up after the show....”

“Have you missed anything from it lately? Any grease-paints and whiskers?”

“No. And if we had, I’d know, because I keep it stocked and see that everything’s there....”

Liptrot paused a moment and then something seemed to strike him. He began to stammer and his words seemed to stick to his palate like flies to a flypaper.

“W-w-ait a - - - bit. Yes. About a year ago, we had some stuff pinched. I remember it. Must have b-b-b-een after the dress rehearsal. Damned awkward on the night. Instead of having the sticks of paint, I had to blend two or three together. Somebody pinched a Lit.K....”

“Pardon....”

“A Lit.K. Mixture of Number 5 and Number 9....”

“Are those the colours of the tints?”

“I’d have thought you’d know that. Detectives often disguise themselves, don’t they?”

“Never done it in my life.”



Liptrot looked put-out. He'd always understood from penny-dreadfuls that.... Well, well. It was the penny-dreadfuls that had started his interest in make-up, and now, detectives never disguised themselves! He looked hard at Littlejohn. Must be a very poor sort of detective, or else, as a matter of policy they didn't make a habit of owning up.

"So somebody took the make-up."

"Yes. A Lit.K., as I said, a stick of carmine Vermillion, and a chunk of black crepe hair—all we'd got. Good job we didn't need whiskers for *Mine's a Bitter*, else we'd have been in a jam."

"That was over a year ago?"

"Yes."

"Thanks very much. And now, I must be going. Good luck for the show."

"Thanks, we'll need it...."

"I am thy father's spirit;  
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away...."

The ghost was walking and talking. Talking well, too. The best voice and style of all the lot.

Littlejohn turned to find Cuthbert Allen on the stage, voicing his lines with easy grace and skill.

The Inspector left the hall smiling to himself. One never knows all the lights some people hide under bushels.

## CHAPTER SIX

# FENNINGS' MILL

LITTLEJOHN was up at eight o'clock. As expected, *The Queen Anne* hadn't much to offer in the way of comfort. The bedroom was cheerless and overlooked a back street where customers parked their cars. Across the way, there was a brush shop in the dim interior of which he could see an old man and a few girls fixing bristles into wooden handles. They all looked fed-up with the job.

There wasn't even "hot and cold" in the room. A large jug and basin on a painted washstand and a can of hot water outside the door. The bedstead was a heavy iron one with brass knobs....

Breakfast was in keeping with the rest. Sausages, half-cold coffee, tough toast and a splash of marmalade. The Inspector lit his pipe and went out, hoping that the case would fold-up quickly and release him from his temporary prison....

It was still cold and wet. The town was dreary and uninteresting; everybody looked bored and worried.

Littlejohn wandered along the main street. The river was still high and now was coloured by a dirty brown dye which some works or other higher up than the town was pouring into it. The way to Fennings' Mill lay along the waterside.

The factory had, at one time, been driven by water power. It towered amid the rest of the small, dirty, brick-built houses, a sharp contrast in stone. The chimney was vomiting smoke and the racket of machinery could be heard long before you reached the mill gates. It was a compact, self-contained place, carrying on preparation in the tall, many-storied part and weaving in low sheds flanking a central yard. The whirr of the spinning frames mingled with the clack of looms.

The mill was surrounded on three sides by a maze of little houses and narrow streets. The river flanked the other.

There was a gate-house at the main entrance. Little better than a shed, with a desk, a fire and a wall-clock where the workers punched their time-

cards. The man who opened the door in reply to Littlejohn's knock was small and bowlegged. His face was pumpkin-shaped and he had a hook instead of a hand on his left arm.

"What do you want?" He removed his pipe and spat past the Inspector into the street.

Inside, on the rough wooden desk, were spread newspapers and football-pool forms. The gateman had been filling in his choices for the week-end and was annoyed at the disturbance. When you stand a chance of winning ten thousand pounds, you don't want your deliberations disturbing!

"Is Mr. Fenning in?"

The man eyed him up and down impudently.

"Which one?"

"Mr. Andrew...."

"You've got some 'opes. Another hour afore he'll be here."

"Is the other brother in?"

"Aye. Mr. James is in th' office. You from the police?"

"Yes."

"I'll see if 'e'll see you...."

The pumpkin left Littlejohn standing at the door and went to speak on a telephone to the mill.

"Go over to th' office, across yard there. He's in there."

The man turned his back and rolled off to his pools again without another word. He seemed to have no interest in anything but next Saturday's winners.

Littlejohn crossed the cobbled yard to the offices. A modern, square, brick-built block with frosted glass windows, each bearing the company's name, "Fennings (1924) Ltd." He passed through the swing-doors into the warm interior. The first door on the right was labelled *Come in*. Littlejohn did so and found himself at a small counter with a full view of the room.

It was a kind of general office for anything and anybody. At a table sat a junior clerk putting used envelopes in piles and sticking labels on them so that they could be used again. His hair stood in a shock on top of his head and his forehead was covered with pimples. Behind him, a workman in dungarees and a cloth cap was manipulating a machine for testing the strength of yarn.

The boy rose, nodded officiously and raised his eyebrows in enquiry. This resulted in a general movement among the pimples on his forehead.

The Inspector handed him his card.

“Mr. James Fenning, please.”

The youth was off like a shot from a gun. He gave his opinion fluently about the detective from Scotland Yard that night at evening school....

The boy was soon back. He was muttering something. He may have been complaining or apologising. You couldn't tell which.

The room into which Littlejohn was ushered was quite different from the rest. Thick red carpet on the floor, light oak panelling on the walls from top to bottom, a circular board-table in the centre with leather chairs round it. And on the walls two portraits in oils of old men and two good etchings.

A door at the far end opened and Mr. James Fenning entered.

He was different altogether from his brother. He looked older and more serious. He was thin, tall, with an ascetic face. Where Mr. Andrew's hair was thick and curly, James's was straight, dark and thin.

They shook hands. Mr. James removed a pair of black-framed spectacles, carefully put them in a case and put the case in his pocket. He was well dressed in blue cheviot with spotless linen and an old-school tie.

“What can I do for you, Inspector?”

The same cultured voice, but more business-like than his brother's. This was a man with no time to waste.

“As you know, I'm engaged on the Barrow case and I'd like, if I may, to look round the place and see where the crime actually happened....”

“Certainly. Anything I can do...?”

“Thank you, sir. I gather that Mr. Barrow had been with you all his life.... All his working life, I mean.”

“Yes. He came to us from school as office boy and rose to be secretary. My father gave him his first job.”

“And all that time, you had found him scrupulously honest?”

“Yes. I can't understand the turn of events at all. It's a complete mystery to me. I'm glad the local police have called in you chaps to help. The sooner it's all cleared up the better.”

“We're all eager to do that. Mrs. Barrow has been urging us on, too. She's very worried about the charge of dishonesty hanging over her husband's name.”

James Fenning had long, delicate hands. They were never still. Not fingering anything, but just moving and twitching, as though he were counting gently on his fingers.

“You’ve seen Mrs. Barrow then?”

“Yes. I was at her place last night.”

“How is she?”

There was a note of anxiety in the tone.

“Seems to be taking it very well.”

Fenning nodded.

Outside they were loading something on a motor-lorry. There was a lot of shouting and then the lorry started up and made off.

Fenning didn’t ask Littlejohn to sit down. He seemed anxious to be getting on with whatever he had been doing when he was disturbed. Now and then his eyes turned anxiously in the direction of his private room.

“I’ll get someone to take you over to the warehouse, then. The crime occurred there and it was there that the little man who went mad found the body....”

“Just one point before I go, sir. The reports say that Mr. Barrow had been altering the books. Is that so?”

“I’m afraid it is.”

“Were you certain it was his handwriting?”

“It was figures he’d altered. Nobody but my brother and I and the accountants had access to those particular ledgers. They were the stock records.”

“Did Mr. Barrow post them himself, then?”

“Oh, no. They were done in the general office, but they were kept under lock and key when not in use.”

“So, they could have been altered in the general office, then?”

“Oh, yes. But the alteration would have soon been spotted. Besides, who, in the main office would have wanted to alter the records?”

“That’s another matter.”

“I know, but the alterations were in Barrow’s figures. We all know his figures....”

“And who recognised them?”

“My brother and I, as well as some of the staff whom the police questioned.”

Fenning looked a bit nettled. He wasn’t used to being cross-questioned about statements he made.

“Have experts been called-in about this?”

"Of course not. It doesn't need an expert. The figures were Barrow's. No doubt about it."

"We'll have to go into that. Perhaps I may see the ledgers later. Meanwhile, what was the nature of the alterations?"

"The previous figures had been carefully erased or scratched out and new ones imposed."

"Was it in cash?"

"No. Stock, as I said before."

"Will you please be a little more explicit, sir?"

James Fenning was getting rattled. He kept looking at the closed door of his room and fidgeting impatiently with his feet.

"Really, Inspector. I'm a busy man. I've a visitor in my room. Couldn't you call later?"

"I'll not keep you a minute, sir. The stock records were...?"

"Briefly, it's this. The ledger contained a record of the contents of the warehouse when we took stock a month ago. The figures are used for the annual balance-sheet, as you're no doubt aware. Next stocktaking, we shall check the warehouse again and this should tally with the balance shown last time, plus additions, minus deliveries outwards. Follow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

"But what had Barrow altered?"

"He had increased the deliveries outward figures, thereby making the stock, depleted by whatever had been stolen, tally. In other words, systematically arranged for stock to come out all right whenever we cared to check it again with the contents of the warehouse."

"I follow. I'm no accountant, sir, but that strikes me as rather stupid. The alterations might have come to light at any time. Surely, Mr. Barrow knew something about book-keeping?"

"Whether he did or not, that's what he did. Altered the books to cover his own thefts."

"Are *you* of the opinion that he was robbing the firm, then?"

"What else could it be and who else?"

"H'm. Do you ever sell stuff from the warehouse to people like Judge?"

"Certainly not. Whatever anyone else may say, I think Barrow was carrying on a black-market racket with Judge and that he met him here to turn over the shirtings after dark...."

“Disguised?”

Fenning pursed his lips.

“Yes, disguised. My theory is that Barrow tried to make himself unrecognisable just in case he was disturbed. My brother thinks the same. He had to come and go through thickly populated streets to get to the mill. The grease paint and whiskers were just the same as the old burglar’s mask....”

“That’s reasonable, sir. So you think....”

“I really must be going, Inspector. Call again when my brother’s in. Just before midday. I’ll be free, too and we can have another talk.”

“Very good, sir. May I have a word with Miss Lackland, please?”

Fenning’s eyebrows rose.

“Miss Lackland? Oh, very well.”

He went to the wall and pressed a bell-push.

The boy with the pimples answered.

“Send Miss Lackland to the Inspector in here, please. Perhaps you’d like the use of this room. More private. Ask for the warehouse on your way out. The boy will take you there. See you later....”

With that, Mr. James hurried off to his room and closed the door. You could hear him speaking quietly to someone inside.

Janet Lackland was dark like her sister and had the same shining, dark metallic-looking hair. But she wore pale-rimmed spectacles, looked older and was more grave and sensible.

“You wanted to see me, Inspector? Won’t you please sit down.”

The girl was pale and had dark circles round her eyes. Her hands were well-kept and sensitive and she kept pushing back the skin at the base of the nails with nervous fingers. She didn’t seem to notice she was doing it.

“I hear that Mr. Barrow was suspected of altering the books of the firm. Do you have access to these ledgers?”

All the remaining colour drained from Janet Lackland’s face leaving the spots of rouge on her cheeks standing out in vivid artificial contrast. Then her eyes blazed.

“It’s a beastly lie! Mr. Barrow would never have done such a thing. He was a fine man. Whoever says he was dishonest is a liar. Oh, I know, they say he was stealing the firm’s goods and covering himself that way; but I know he wouldn’t have done.”

Tears began to flow down her cheeks although she made no noise or motion of weeping. She was very overwrought.

“You were a friend of Mr. Barrow’s?”

“Yes. He was very good to me. I won’t have his name blackened and him not here to defend himself.”

And with that, she burst into tears properly.

It took some time for her to recover her control and then she sat wanly facing Littlejohn like someone waiting sentence.

“You played in Mr. Barrow’s little orchestra, I believe, Miss Lackland?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Would you describe Mr. Barrow as a happy man?”

Utter silence in the room. Outside all the noises of the mill and beyond Mr. James’s door, the sound of his voice talking to his visitor. Littlejohn repeated the question.

“Was Mr. Barrow happy?”

The girl stared straight into Littlejohn’s eyes and threw back her head. Then suddenly she gave way in a torrent of words.

“You needn’t think I don’t know what’s been said about Ambrose Barrow and me. I know it all. I was in love with him. He gave me all the things that go for happiness. He taught me music, he encouraged me in my playing, he took me in his orchestra, yes, and he took me to concerts and did all kinds of sweet little things to make me happy. And I tried to make up for all the misery his wife caused him. To her way of thinking he wasn’t good enough for her. The Fennings were her class. Her class, indeed! Brought up in the gutter! That’s her class....”

“Was Barrow in love with you, Miss Lackland?”

“Yes. I’m not ashamed of it. Put it down in your notebook and tell everyone. I don’t care. I tried to keep it secret, but now I don’t care. He seems to have nobody to defend his good name now he’s dead. Well... I’ll defend it. I want everybody to know we were in love and I’ll tell them why and what a good man he was. Do you know why I wasn’t his mistress? I would have gone any length, I loved him so much. But he wouldn’t have spoiled it that way. He said so. He loved me too much. Sordid week-ends in hotels, creeping here and there debasing our love by dodging those who didn’t know the meaning of love.... That was Ambrose Barrow, and that’s as I remember him. I shall love him till I die. And now he’s dead, strangled, in grease paint and a moustache....”



She started to laugh, but before the hysterical fit could go far, Littlejohn leaned over and slapped her face.

She recovered and started to sob quietly.

“Sorry I had to do that, but really, Miss Lackland, we can’t have you advertising your feelings like that. Try to calm down a bit before you go back in the office....”

“I’m sorry, Inspector. I can’t realise....”

“I know. And now I’ve a suggestion to make. Say nothing to anyone about your love affair with Ambrose Barrow; the less said the better, as far as you’re concerned. Leave things to me. If Barrow was innocent of the charges, I’ll see that his name’s cleared. No need for you to attract attention and damaging publicity by making a fuss.... Don’t you agree?”

“Yes, Inspector.”

“Then you’ll leave it to me. I’ll defend Mr. Barrow if he deserves it....”

“Thank you. You’re the first one who’s understood. Ambrose was really a good man....”

“Well, don’t start to upset yourself again, Miss Lackland. From now on, rely on me. And now, run along and bathe your eyes. Don’t let them know in the office that you’ve been having a scene. And, by the way, I may want you to help me with the books Mr. Barrow is said to have tampered with. Will you... later?”

“Anything....”

“And now, I’ll be off to the warehouse.”

The pimply boy led the way. Past the offices, across the yard to an old stone building of three storeys. On the way there, Littlejohn looked back at the window of what he judged was Mr. James Fenning’s private room. There was a desk-light burning behind the frosted screen which held the shadows of James and his visitor, who seemed to be standing ready to part. Just above the screen projected an object which Littlejohn easily recognised.

It was the pill-box hat!

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## WHISKERS AND PAINT

BENJAMIN YULE was head warehouseman at Fennings. A little fat rolling man, dressed in dungarees, wearing a cloth cap and full of his own importance. Fate had not dealt kindly with Ben. Once, he'd been in business on his own and brought back a wife to a flourishing little shop. A multiple store had immediately opened opposite, the child they'd planned the future for had been stillborn, and his wife, Cora, had grown into a nag and a scold. Ben had had to find a job, a menial one, too, and he was just contemplating throwing himself in the reservoir which provided water for Fennings' engines, when Mrs. Cooper-Cantrell came to the rescue.

It was long-distance redemption, for Mrs. Cooper-Cantrell was the leader of a new sect, the First Pentecostals, in Iowa somewhere. Ben was caught up in the crusade which swept through Brockfield and now he was the leader of one of the meetings. So sure was he that all the "Truths" contained in Mrs. Cooper-Cantrell's Testament were correct, that he took on a new lease of life, faced his troubles four-square and routed them, Cora included. Soon he had his wife bellowing hymns of joy and praise above all the rest, and they appointed him head warehouseman at the mill because the Cooper-Cantrell authority which covered him like an impervious cloak, made him a leader of men.

Ben took Littlejohn's measure by eyeing him up and down. The Inspector probably hadn't yet received THE MESSAGE (See C.-C. Testament, page 46) but Ben liked him. He decided to co-operate. He showed the Inspector exactly where the body had been found. Not that that did much good, for the place had been swilled out and scrubbed since the crime.

Reader Yule—Ben had a title in the sect and was proud of it—did, however, spring a surprise on Littlejohn. He produced the broken top of a stick of grease-paint and asked if that was any use to him.

"That any use to yer?" he asked.

"Where did you get this from, Mr. Yule?" said Littlejohn.

"On the window-bottom the day after the murder."

"Why didn't you hand it to the police, then?"

"I didn't know what it was at first. I called here on my way to Meeting that Sunday mornin'. I always do. Just to see as all's well. It's on me way.

The police were here when I arrived. They was so busy talking to the two Mister Fennings that they didn't notice me. I was of no importance...."

Ben turned his small, button nose heavenwards slightly and sniffed. His pride had been hurt by the local police and he'd taken the huff.

"In me own warehouse, too. Treated like an intruder."

"Well, Mr. Yule?"

"I potted about a bit and found this on the window-sill nearest the corpse. That one there...."

He pointed a podgy index.

"... I put it in me pocket and forgot it. Meantime, the police just ignored me. Dealt with the directors and ignored me. I could have told them a thing or two, but I wasn't going to butt in where I wasn't wanted."

"It was your duty to tell them, though, Mr. Yule. Your personal feelings shouldn't have prevented that."

"You needn't tell me my duty. I know that well enough," snapped Ben with the conviction of a true Cooper-Cantrellite. "That's why I'm tryin' to help you now."

"Well, sir?"

"I'm coming to it."

Ben liked the "sir." It showed respect. He was on Littlejohn's side at once. The local police would ignore him, would they? Well....

"It's like this. I got wet-through on the Sunday after the murder. It put me in bed with me lumbago again and I was away a week. Couldn't even straighten myself up. Did the police come to see me? No, they didn't. They messed about with the Fennings who know nothing what goes on in the warehouse, except what I tell 'em. I'm a trusted servant of the firm...."

"I'm sure you are."

"Yes. Well, it was this way. We did sell bits and pieces of shirtings and stuff, coupon-free, to outsiders. Nothing big. Just ends, at most a foot or two, cut off when we made up the lengths for export or home markets. There'd be perhaps bits with flaws in 'em, or the selvedge...."

Outside they were loading a lorry with large brown-paper parcels and on benches inside, girls were wrapping up lengths of shirting, labelling them and addressing them. Some of the stuff was being baled for export and stencilled "NO HOOKS." This was superintended by a huge, loose-jointed ape of a man, who kept looking humbly in Ben's direction for approval.

Now and then, Ben would make some staccato remark on the proceedings and then go on with his tale.

“Well.... These bits and pieces, not many of 'em, you know, because the staff take their share... payin' for it of course.... As I was sayin', these bits and pieces is sold to fent dealers.... Judge was one of 'em. He paid for what he got. Nothin' underhand. There's no dishonesty in my warehouse, mister.... Now then, Charlie. Find Beatrice somethin' to do. She'll do nothin' unless she's told....”

“O.K., Ben,” meekly replied his subordinate.

“... And the money we drew, perhaps a pound or two a time, was put in a box in my desk....”

Ben produced a cigar-box stuffed with notes and silver to prove his point.

“When it gets to twenty pounds it goes in the office and is booked.”

“Yes, but what had Barrow to do with all this?”

“On the Saturday he was killed, I had a rally of Brethren out of town and as Mr. Judge was due to call after the market, I mentioned to Mr. Barrow I couldn't be here. To my surprise, he said he'd be passing and would call. Judge was here at six, and he'd hand over the remnants and take the pay.”

“I see. Why didn't you tell the local police all that? They wanted to find out if the Judge deal was straight and above board. They spent weeks on it. They also wanted to know why Barrow was here. You held the answers and said nothing.”

Ben Yule's little eyes flashed and his lips tightened.

“They never asked me. Anyhow, I've told *you*, haven't I? I'm not one for speaking out of my turn....”

“You should have made an exception this time, Mr. Yule. Didn't anybody else know of these things and tell Inspector Faddiman when he called in your absence?”

“No. Charlie there came to see me that Monday. Wanted to know if he should mention it.... Now then, Charlie, keep them lads movin'. That lot's to be got out soon as we can....”

“O.K. Ben....”

“No, I tells Charlie. If they want your advice, they'll ask for it. He'll do nothin' without me agreein' first, won't Charlie. So nothin' was said.”

“So, out of spite and pride, Ben, you withheld important information from the police. I’m surprised at you,”

“I’ve no spite nor pride in me. I poured contempt on all my pride long ago. My conscience is clear...”

“I’m glad of that, Ben.”

Littlejohn left Ben to think it out and called at the office again. He asked for Miss Lackland.

The girl entered the shabby enquiry office and seemed surprised at the fresh visit. She still bore the traces of tears.

“Could you tell me, Miss Lackland, if Mr. Barrow knew anything about professional make-up? I mean, did he do any for the amateurs?”

“Oh, yes, Inspector. We had one or two lectures on make-up once and Mr. Barrow was very interested. He said he’d like to help before the show. Lend a hand, you know, before the music started. And he did. He was quite helpful and good.”

“Thank you, Miss Lackland. That’s all for the time being.”

There were visitors in Faddiman’s office when Littlejohn arrived, A parson and his wife. The Rev. D. Theodore Brewer, of the church where Barrow had been choirmaster. Unfortunate name for a clergyman, but there it was.

Mr. Brewer was a small, light-footed thin little man with pink cheeks, a bald head, a noble Roman nose and a meek, gentlemanly manner. His wife was twice his size; large, heavy-bosomed, with a flat round face and a firm voice. They both looked anxious, partly from the matter in hand, partly because they were expecting the Lord to call them from Brockfield, which they disliked, to distant seaside parts, and the letter hadn’t arrived yet.

“Ah, here you are,” said Faddiman in a voice which hinted that Littlejohn had been taking a day off, unauthorised. “Mr. Brewer has called with some information...”

He introduced the parties and there was a lot of fussing before they all got down to business.

“I am, as you may know, minister at the church at which Mr. Barrow played the organ. It was a very sad loss and a great pity, for he was a good man.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mind you,” interposed Mrs. Brewer, “Mind you, there were things about his domestic life that were most unsavoury, but, then, that wasn’t his

fault. It was his wife's. Surprising how a woman can drag a man down...."

The Rev. D. Theodore Brewer coughed apologetically and looked firmly around to show that *he* hadn't yet been stricken by his huge partner.

"I have heard a lot of talk of late," went on Mr. Brewer, "about police enquiries. It's surprising how, recently, with the re-opening of the case, things seem to have... to have... er... WARMED UP, shall we say."

The little man looked terribly pleased with the metaphor and repeated it.

"Warmed up."

Faddiman gave him a perforating glare. Was the little devil hinting that *he* had only been carrying on a lukewarm investigation?

"That is hardly fair, my dear," boomed Mrs. Brewer. Her husband was always putting his innocent foot in it. They were wanting to leave the Brockfield church because of a split he had caused by mixing up the names of the deacons at the opening of a bazaar. Everybody had laughed except the deacons and their retinues. After all, when you forget the names of men you've known for a dozen years.... He'd called Rainrider and Heathcote, Heathrider and Raincoat....

"That is hardly fair, my dear. Mr. Faddiman certainly did his best, but then, Scotland Yard is *trained* to capture murderers. You can't expect the local police, who only get a murder now and then, to know how to do it...."

Mrs. Brewer always made matters worse. Faddiman was furious. Littlejohn didn't know where to look to hide his smile.

"Well?" asked Faddiman acidly.

The parson looked up suddenly. He couldn't understand what he'd done to deserve all this.

"I only thought it my duty to call and say that I saw Mr. Barrow entering Fennings' Mill on the night of the crime."

"Did you, indeed, sir? And why haven't you brought this information earlier. The case has been open for months. It has *never* been closed, or off the boil, as you seem to think."

Mrs. Brewer opened and shut her mouth several times like a fish out of water.

"I didn't think it important. After all, he must have entered the mill to get murdered, mustn't he?"

Mr. Brewer smiled benevolently at his powers of logic.

"Yes, but the time was important. You should have called before this. It's most annoying."

Littlejohn intervened. Faddiman's spleen was holding up the interview.

"What time would that be, sir?"

Mr. Brewer took out a gold hunter watch, a present from his former church, and carefully consulted it, as though the time in question were perpetually recorded there.

"About a quarter to six, Inspector, as near as I can say."

"How came you there, sir?"

"I was sick-visiting. One of my congregation, since dead, poor fellow...."

"Mr. Heading," added Mrs. Brewer helpfully.

"Yes, my dear. He lived in one of a row of houses opposite the main gates of the mill. I remember the time, because I had to be sure to meet Dr. Hornblower at the station. He was conducting a special service for me that evening. A good thing he could play the organ, too, for with Mr. Barrow dead and unable to be with us, we were in a dreadful fix. However, Dr. Hornblower...."

"Never mind Dr. Hornblower, Mr. Brewer," snapped Faddiman, "Please get on with Barrow."

"REALLY, Mr. Faddiman," boomed Mrs. Brewer.

Only *she* was allowed to bully her meek little partner.

"I'm sorry, sir, but our time is valuable and I'm anxious...."

"Of course you are. We all are. Well... as I was telling your colleague, it was a quarter to six when I left the Headings. He was at death's door, then, by the way. As I closed the door and put up my umbrella, for it was raining hard, as you know, I saw Mr. Barrow enter the mill yard by the iron gate...."

"Are you sure it was Barrow?" asked Littlejohn.

Faddiman looked hard at the Inspector and the parson and his wife looked as pained as though he'd called the little man a liar.

"Well, they did say the police found poor Barrow in a cloth cap.... Most unusual for him; he always wore a grey trilby.... *And* with a moustache on. The man I saw had such a cap and I saw his moustache under the lamp near the gate."

"Did you make out his features, sir?"

"Nothing more, I'm afraid...."

"So, it might have been anyone else with a cap and moustache?"



“Yes. I suppose it might. But who could it have been? Mr. Barrow was there and was killed. Oh, dear me.... It might have been the murderer. I never thought of that!”

Mr. Brewer clicked his tongue against his teeth and looked utterly dismayed at the thought.

“So you’re not sure, sir.”

“It was about Barrow’s height....”

“Did the man let himself in with a key?”

“No. I’m sure he didn’t. He was approaching the gate when I saw him, pushed it gently, found it open, and went in....”

“Thank you very much, sir....”

The clerical party left with many expressions of farewell and good will.

Faddiman blew out his cheeks.

“Well?” he said.

“I’m beginning to wonder whether the murderer didn’t make-up Barrow and put on the whiskers after the crime....”

“Whatever for?”

“Suppose he wanted to get in the mill without disclosing his identity. He could make himself up like we found Barrow. Then, kill Barrow and put the disguise on him. Remember Mr. Brewer surprised the fellow—Barrow, or whoever it was—entering the mill. The man knew he’d been spotted and enquiries would be made. He’d arranged to meet Barrow, or knew Barrow would be there, and intended to kill Barrow. To make it look that the man Brewer saw had been the one killed, the murderer transferred his disguise to his victim.”

“Seems rather a tall tale to me.”

“Just surmise, but a likely explanation. We’ll make another test. Which policeman found and brought in the body?”

“132 and 124, Meads and Harris.”

“Either of them handy?”

Faddiman rang for an officer. P.C. 124 was on point-duty in the town centre. They soon had him there. A well set-up man with a red nose and soft brown eyes like a spaniel’s.

“Harris, do you know anything about theatrical make-up?”

“No, sir. But Meads does. He was in the Police Amateur Operatics at the last place he was at.”

“Did he say anything about the make-up on the body the pair of you found at Fennings?”

“Yes, sir. Said it was a rotten job. Showed me. Paint put on without any ground, as he called it. Just daubed straight on from the stick.”

“There!” said Littlejohn. “Somebody put it on for Barrow. Somebody who didn’t know a thing about it and was in a hurry. Barrow knew how to make up properly and, if he wanted to get off the grease paint without a lot of fuss, which he *did* want to do, he would certainly have used a cold-cream or similar ground. Yes, I think the poor chap was disguised after he was strangled.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## THE CLOTH CAP

IT was turned noon when Littlejohn got back to Fennings' Mill from the police station. He found neither of the directors there. James had left early on a business appointment; and Andrew had called and gone off to lunch at *The Queen Anne*. As Littlejohn turned to make his way back to the hotel, where he hoped to get his own meal and then perhaps catch Mr. Andrew for a talk, a buzzer sounded in the yard and all the hands, like prisoners released from gaol, poured hurriedly out of the mills to lunch. There was a canteen on the premises, but more than half of the personnel worked near enough to their homes to go there for the meal.

Scores of them, men, women and young lads and girls crowded out and many of them mounted bicycles and pedalled off. Littlejohn soon found himself in the throng of factory hands. Some of them knew him. News travels fast. One and another nodded familiarly, others, particularly the young, started and pointed him out to one another. The Man from Scotland Yard was quite an event.

The yard and neighbouring streets had been quiet and almost deserted before the siren blew. Now, after the workers had made their rush for food, a silence descended again.

Facing the warehouse stood the tall engine house, through the high glass windows of which could be seen, from where Littlejohn was standing, the whole length of the bright piston of the huge engine. The crankshaft, driving the flywheel with rhythmic ease, looked like a great shining claw, reaching out and then withdrawing. The whole place shook with vibration, a steady thud, thud, which might have been the percussion of a symphony of machines, looms, carding engines, winding and spinning frames, each with its own particular note. Then, the strokes of the shaft slowly grew slower, the flywheel and governors gradually came to rest, the shrill whirr and clack of the machinery all over the mill changed and faded away. All that could be heard, at length, was the escape of steam somewhere and the movement of the factory hands.

Beneath the engine-house was the fire-hole, where two great boilers, each with its roaring furnace, supplied the steam. Two firebeaters scrambled here and there, opening the furnace doors to feed them, shovelling the coal

from the stacks nearby with almost graceful ease into the flames. The whole place was spick and span. A well-kept, prosperous concern....

As Littlejohn stood there taking it all in, a window in the engine-house opened, and a bald head was thrust out. Impossible to make out the features, for the window was a small one and the owner seemed only to be able to reach high enough to *get* his head through it. A hand came round the side of the jaw, two fingers were inserted in the mouth and bald-head managed to blow a shrill blast on them.

Littlejohn looked up.

“Hey! Can yo come up? Aw can’t come down to yer. Ah’ve me engines to see to....”

Littlejohn waved and climbed up to the metal door of the engine-room by means of the iron staircase from the yard.

The heat of the atmosphere caught the Inspector by the throat as he entered the place. The faint panic of choking and the unpleasant smell of hot oil.

There were two men there, the engineer and his assistant, each dressed in blue overalls with little else on underneath. Both seemed to thrive in their semi-tropical atmosphere, for they were flabbily fat and cheerful. The chief was a head taller than his mate and apparently provided the technical knowledge and supervision whilst his mate did the heavier work. The younger man was busy with an oil-can, lubricating the bearings whilst the engine was at rest. The great machinery, looming with mighty harnessed energy, was beautifully well-kept, like a well-behaved animal, yet full of savage power. The two attendants looked dwarfed beside it.

The chief welcomed Littlejohn with a smile which disclosed a mouthful of very even white false teeth. He was a jovial fellow and whenever he beamed on you, you saw nothing but the teeth. The face was smooth, oily and etiolated from the equatorial temperatures he worked in and his blue eyes protruded so much that it seemed a strain to keep the eyeballs in their sockets.

“Ah just wanted a word with you,” said the engineer wiping his hands over and over again from force of habit, on a piece of oily waste. “My name’s Walker and ah’m th’ engineer here.”

“Glad to meet you, Mr. Walker....”

His assistant stopped work and stood beside the controls watching Littlejohn with great interest. By degrees he shuffled nearer and nearer in

the hope of overhearing what the conversation might be about. He was in his twenties and looked as though, once having chosen the right size of overall, he had then inflated himself, for his uniform was skin-tight and bulging from the flesh beneath.

“Get on wi’ thy dinner, Seth,” shouted Mr. Walker. “Them long ears o’ thine ’ll hear nowt good o’ thyself for listenin’.”

Seth somewhat sheepishly sought and opened a large tin lunch-box, from which he lifted enormous cheese sandwiches. These he stuffed in his mouth like a man feeding or packing a machine, and his swollen jaws began to rotate rhythmically as he tried to look as though he weren’t interested in his boss and his works.

A small apprentice, also in overalls, arrived with two cans of tea and handed them to the engineers. He smiled cheekily at Walker and seemed disposed to stay and lark.

“Thee be off. Ah’m busy,” said Walker.

“O.K. Sandy, I’ll remember that next time you want yer tea....”

“None o’ thy lip.... Be off with thee.... Scram....”

Seth was busy pouring tea in the lid of the can and transferring it with relish into his already overflowing mouth. He masticated vigorously.

Walker, having helped himself to a swig of tea and lubricated his vocal cords, now turned to attend to Littlejohn.

“You’re the chap from Scotland Yard, aren’t you?”

“Yes....”

“On the look-out for clues, ah guess?”

His face looked all teeth and eyeballs.

“Well, that’s part of our business, Mr. Walker.”

“I’ve got a clue here for yer then....”

Followed by the eyes of his assistant, which glinted with curiosity over his food-swollen cheeks, Walker walked to the wall and from a nail above a number of gauges, took a dirty cloth cap.

“There you are,” he said, handing it with great satisfaction to the Inspector.

Littlejohn smiled.

“What’s this?”

Seth made noises through his food and finding he could not properly articulate, masticated more furiously than ever to empty his mouth.

“Thee shut up and get on wi’ thy dinner. This is my business....”

“Yes, but, dad....”

So they were father and son! They looked it.

“Shut up, I said.”

The cap was an ordinary tweed one, now quite dry, but bearing evidence of immersion in water. Inside, a dirty piece of triangular silk bore the name “Bolting, Bond Street, London.”

“Well?” said Littlejohn.

“Well, wot?” asked Walker. He seemed to expect a long chain of deductions from Littlejohn, just like those of Sherlock Holmes, who was one of Mr. Walker’s great favourites. Size of wearer, age, height, habits, temper and a club-foot. He at least expected these....

“Where did this come from, Mr. Walker?” asked Littlejohn disappointingly.

“Out o’ th’ mill lodge....”

He pointed a flabby finger through a side window to a sheet of water behind the engine-house. It was steaming; a long conduit pipe discharged a stream of boiling water from the mill. The contents of the reservoir were a dirty green, but from the high position of the engine-house, you could see to the bottom.

“Somebody threw that cap in the lodge. There were a piece of old iron in it to weight it down. From below, you can’t see th’ bottom o’ th’ water and so, anybody wanting to get rid of it would nacherally chuck it in with a sinker. But from up ’ere we can see right to th’ bottom. Seth there spotted that cap th’ Monday after Barrow were done-in. By climbin’ along that pipe as pours th’ hot water out, he managed to fish it out. There it is, mister. What do you make of it?”

“Nothing much, as yet, Mr. Walker. But I’d like to take it with me.”

Mr. Walker looked disappointed. Sherlock Holmes would have had it in a crack. Probably gone off and arrested the murderer right off. This chap, however....

“Well, it’s no good to me. It’s too big, for one thing. Comes right down over me ears. So you may as well take it. I thought it ’ud be a bit of use to you, but it seems I’m wrong.”

Mr. Walker sounded very bitter.

“It may prove very useful, Mr. Walker, and I appreciate your letting me have it.”

“Oh, well, in that case, it’s awreet, isn’t it?”

Mr. Walker recovered his good humour and bared his pot teeth and vulcanite gums amiably.

“How are yo gettin’ on wi’ th’ case, Mister?”

“Not so well, just yet. It’s a case of patience and steady work, isn’t it? We’ll find out sooner or later.”

Down in the yard the hands were beginning to dribble back. Some youngsters started to kick a football about and groups of workers squatted here and there talking.

Suddenly a large car entered through the main gates, crossed the yard and pulled up at the offices. A uniformed chauffeur sprang out, two of the hands detached themselves from the group of talkers near the warehouse, and the three together carefully removed from the car a large human bundle hardly visible through the wrappings of a large coat and scarf and a soft hat. You could just see, as the procession carrying the burden passed into the offices, a pale face, irritable and worn, with a small grey moustache and spectacles.

Walker watched the proceedings from Littlejohn’s side.

“That’s Mr. Miles Fenning. Father of Mr. Andrew and Mr. James. He’s a caution and no mistake. Had a stroke about five years since, but his brain’s as active as any young man’s. In fact, activer. He’s still managin’ director here; and does he run folks round? I’d by far rather have a crack on the head than a taste o’ Mr. Miles’s tongue when he’s roused. He comes once a week and on board days and always lands here when the sons are out. That’s to see how things is. Catch folk at it, as you might say.”

Mr. Walker nodded knowingly.

“Hey, Seth. Go down an’ tell Bill Pearson that Mr. Miles is ’ere, so ’e’d better blow that buzzer on the dot. And see that them engines is off right on the mark of half-past. Else they’ll be merry ’ell to pay. Get going. Don’t be all day about it. It’ll be stoppin’ time afore tha gets started, else....”

He turned to Littlejohn apologetically.

“How I came to be th’ father o’ that lad, I don’t for the life of me know. He doesn’t take after me, and he doesn’t take after his mother. He’s that slow. Must take after my missus’s father, who never worked after forty....”

And having delivered himself of this intimate piece of domestic confidence, Mr. Walker turned to other things.

“Them Fennings is a queer lot. Not one of ’em alike. Father’s best business man in these parts, by far. As tough as hide, he is. Mr. Andrew’s



more at home wi' women, wine, song, art galleries and foreigners than cotton, though ah must say, he knows his business. And Mr. James... well.... There never were a better mechanic anywhere for all his university eddication and smart appearance. There's nothin' he likes better than to come up here in overalls when we've any mechanicking jobs to do. Just 'is hobby, like. He's a tip-top Chemist, too. But th' lads isn't as good as th' old man. Not by a long chalk. This business is what it is to-day thanks to Mr. Miles. I'll bet he's runnin' somebody round in th'office. Just like 'im to call and shorten their dinner hours...."

"Are there any more in the family?"

"No. Old Mrs. Fenning an' two other sons died years ago. They live up-town at the Old Hall. Three men with servants and th' widow of one of the dead sons to look after 'em. Mr. Andrew's married, but his wife can't stick these parts. I guess she doesn't get on too well with old man Fenning, either. Spends most of her time in London."

"How long have the family been here, Mr. Walker?"

"Oh, generations. It's a queer history. The Old Hall's always belonged to the Fenning family. They were country gentry before there was any mills here. They do say that the Old Hall once had miles of open country round it, but as the town grew, it got built up, till now there's just a bit of a park left. It's hundreds of years old. People come for miles to see it...."

"And what about the family? How did they come to own this mill?"

"Built it, of course. Mr. Miles's grandfather. They had their wits about 'em, them Fennings. They saw that the new gentry would be those as made their money in mills and such like, instead of on the land their fathers left 'em. So, they built this mill and kept their fortunes alive when the landed gentry had died out."

"Are they a good lot to work for?"

"Oh, yes. Very good. The old man would skin a flint. Though he's fair enough, is Mr. Miles. I'll say that for him. But the sons are easy enough. Mr. Andrew especially. He's more a man of the world and broad-minded. Mr. James is suffer and prouder than the others. Very proud of his family, is Mr. James. Almost a mania with him. Coats of arms, mottoes, family tree back to the year 1066.... Right up his street. Proud as punch of the family. And yet, he can strip out and take a hand in taking down this engine with anybody. Queer mixture. There's nowt queerer than folks, is there, mister?"

"No. Is Mr. James married?"

“He’s not. Though it’s not for want of th’ lassies trying. He’d be a good catch for anybody as could put up with him. Plenty o’ brass and steady with it. I will say this for the family, they’re steady. Not too much drink, quiet living as far as that sort go, and not so fond of the women as a lot as I could mention in this town. Of course, they’ve had a bit of a fling, now and then. There was talk about Mr. Andrew and Barrow’s wife—a widow she is now—but it all blowed over. Not Flo.’s doing, I should imagine. She was one for a good time and hardly likely to let a catch like Mr. Andrew go of her own free will. I suppose he got fed-up with her. I don’t blame ’im. Perhaps he was like me, preferred blondes after all.”

At this sally, Mr. Walker’s face became all eyes and teeth again and his body shook inside his overalls like a huge jelly.

“I could tell you a thing or two about goings-on in this town....”

But Mr. Walker’s sudden Rabelaisian mood was cut short by a shrill outbreak from the mill siren. Lunch-time was over.

Mr. Walker consulted his watch, nodded approval and shouted for Seth.

“Hey, Seth! Stand to. Th’ buzzer’s gone....”

“I heard it, dad.”

“Don’t back-answer me....”

Mr. Walker turned a wheel near the cylinder-head. There was a rush of steam in the cylinders. With the engineer gripping the control lever, the great shaft began gently to move, the flywheel gathered speed, the wire ropes of the driving gear slowly started to travel. The beat of the engine accelerated and soon, the whole beautiful machine was smoothly and efficiently doing its work. Mr. Walker surveyed his engine with pride.

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she, mister?”

Littlejohn agreed she *was* a beauty. He had a vague feeling of awe as he watched the mighty piston fling itself forward and then return....

In the buildings around, the symphony was beginning again. Looms, frames, engines, clacking and rattling and turning, with the firebeaters keeping up steam, stripped to the waist before furnaces like the mouths of hell, and Mr. Walker and Son, upstairs, proudly dancing attendance of their “beauty”. And all of them making money for the Fennings....

## CHAPTER NINE

# THE OLD HALL

BROCKFIELD OLD HALL, the family seat of the Fennings for many generations, came upon you quite by surprise as you tried to find it. The tide of green fields and trees having gradually receded before that of industrialism, the old house had been left almost high and dry in its park among mills and working-class dwellings. A split in the family caused the new Hall to be built in half the grounds of the old one. It is a more vulgar and pretentious monument to Victorian taste and self-satisfaction, with balustrades, urns, heavy fittings, and a general air of magnificent bad taste. It need not concern us here, for it has been converted into flats, occupied by four prolific tenants whose total of sixteen children cause the trustees who run the estate to curse the day it was ever built.

The Old Hall is entirely different. It is said that John of Gaunt, Lambert Simnel, Cardinal Wolsey, Queen Elizabeth and Titus Oates all slept there at one time or another; that there are priest holes in it; that Shakespeare once was there, for Alice Fenning, then Fenninge, was The Dark Lady of the Sonnets; and that Cromwell's troopers stabled their horses in the private chapel, now a garage. Certainly the place is very old. The keystone of the graceful stone front-door frame bears the date 1587, the small-paned, leaded windows look genuine, and the glass in most of them was made by craftsmen of a past age. The rooms are low and cool and their beams are rough and show the marks of the adze. The Fenning ghost is reputed to walk there on occasion.

Littlejohn approached the Hall from the main road. There was a short gravel carriage drive leading to the front door and as he strode along it, he heard someone playing the piano and playing it well. Nothing pretty or sentimental, but good, solid, honest-to-goodness Bach for well-tempered Clavier, tackled with the self-confidence and gusto of an experienced player. He stopped to listen.

"Listening to Mary doing her daily dozen?"

Littlejohn turned to find Andrew Fenning at his elbow. He looked taller and more striking than on the night they had first met in *The Queen Anne*, for he was wearing loose tweeds with a blue shirt. He might have known Littlejohn all his life. He shook hands and took the Inspector by the arm.

"You called about the murder, Inspector? Come along in."

The interior of the Hall had been altered from the original. The heavy staircase of past years had been removed to give more light and air and replaced by a lighter structure, with shallow steps and a beautiful slender curving handrail. The furniture consisted of collector's pieces. Venetian mirrors and old prints livened the walls, and deep carpets softened the tread.

"Come in here, Inspector."

They entered the room where Preludes and Fugues were being played and as soon as they opened the door, the music ceased.

"Sorry, Mary. Coal shortage, you know. This is the only warm room in the place...."

"Don't worry, Andrew. I've finished...."

Littlejohn had never seen a more beautiful woman than the one who approached them from the piano.

She was tall and well-built, with the grace of movement of a panther, but with none of its furtiveness. She had a pale complexion, yet the slight pink of healthy blood under the skin saved her from looking delicate. She was wearing a plain, excellently-tailored blue serge costume, and a cream jumper. She had kept on her costume coat, probably through the chill of the large room, and by the way the collar was cut, her exquisite white neck emerged like a tulip from its sheath of foliage. The mouth was small with finely moulded lips, the nose high-arched and delicate with sensitive fine nostrils, the eyes grey and straight, wide-set, under a clean, intelligent forehead. The face reminded you of a well-cut cameo. As the girl rose, she tossed back a mass of fair hair, shining with the tender tints of amber. There was good breeding and taste in every line of her.

The Fenning family certainly had an eye for beauty!

"This is Mary, my late brother's wife. She's the chatelaine of this place, except when she's not wandering round the country playing at concerts...."

She offered her hand to Littlejohn. It was rather large, yet not out of proportion with the build of the girl, with long, tapering delicate fingers. Littlejohn noticed at once how gracefully and fastidiously she used her hands. He always noticed people's hands.

The room was large and gloomy at the end where there were no windows. The piano stood by the leaded casements, which were set in stone frames of great age. There was a fire of logs and coal in the large open hearth. This spread warmth in the immediate vicinity but the rest was cold

and damp. Littlejohn wondered how Mary kept her fingers warm enough for her practising.

“The Inspector’s dealing with the crime down at the mill, Mary. I suppose you’re here to ask us some questions....”

“Just one or two if you don’t mind, sir.”

“Fire away, then. You won’t need Mary, will you?”

“No, sir.”

The girl was evidently anxious to be off.

“Well, I’ll leave you, then. There’s lunch to see to. I’d like to stay, though, and hear all about it, Inspector. I’m naturally interested in police work....”

She shook hands again and left them.

Yes, Mary Fenning was interested in police work. She was Inspector Faddiman’s daughter! That point had been the subject of an interesting and illuminating conversation just before Littlejohn left the police station to visit the Old Hall.

Faddiman had seemed uneasy for a long time in Littlejohn’s presence. He’d been a long while making up his mind what to do, but finally decided. After a lot of hemming and hawing he told Littlejohn that he was contemplating resigning.

“Whatever for, Inspector? Because you haven’t succeeded in laying this murderer by the heels, it doesn’t say you’re incompetent. You’ve done your best and now I’m here to help you. *I* certainly shan’t resign if I don’t solve the crime.”

“But I haven’t done my best, Littlejohn. That’s just it. I haven’t done my best. I went so far, and then when the trail led me in a certain direction, I grew afraid and slack.”

Littlejohn had been filling his pipe. He laid down his pouch on the table and faced Faddiman across it.

“What *is* all this about, Faddiman?”

“I’ve been mixing duty with family sentiment and it doesn’t do. Doctors don’t attend their nearest and dearest professionally. Neither should policemen....”

They were sitting in the new police station, of which Faddiman was very proud. A large, sunny room for the inspector, new furniture in light oak, everything spick and span, with a smell of fresh wood and furniture-cream pervading the place. Across the road stood a large school. It was

morning recess and you could see the boys running wildly about in the playground.

“My daughter Mary’s a member by marriage of the Fenning family. In fact, she’s practically mistress of the Old Hall.”

Littlejohn was flabbergasted. To think of Faddiman having an intimate connection with the Fenning family and saying nothing about it!

“I understand,” said Littlejohn. “I’m treading the road which you’ve previously travelled. I’ve left the spivs behind and now it looks very much as if one of the Fennings is involved in this crime in one way or another.”

“That’s it. Not that I could say how. I do honestly assure you, Littlejohn, I couldn’t say how. But the trail is leading to my daughter being involved and I’ve not done my duty to the best of my ability as a result.”

“I understand.”

“As you can see from my appearance, I’ve not much longer to go. In fact, in six months’ time, I’m due to retire. I wish I could have stuck it out and gone honourably. But this is on my conscience. I’m going to resign.”

“You’re going to do nothing of the kind, Faddiman. I know *you* didn’t call in Scotland Yard, but now this case is my responsibility. I shall go on with it wherever it leads and I shall do my duty whoever is involved. As for you, it’s a matter of your own conscience, I admit. But you’re a very useful man here and whatever you may have done on this case, you’re now handing over to me. You will tell me everything frankly and worry no more about past history....”

“Very well. We’ll leave my resignation for the time being. I’ll tell you about my daughter.”

“Yes, do.”

“My wife’s been dead a number of years, and I’ve not married again. Didn’t want to, because I have a sentimental idea she is waiting for me somewhere and that’s as I want it to be....”

Littlejohn was lighting his pipe and studied Faddiman’s prim figure and stern bearing through his pipe smoke. Strange, what gentle ideas some people hold behind a stolid exterior....

“Mary was always a bright girl, but she took to music most of all and at the age of ten could play the piano very well, we thought. We kept her at it and she loved it. Funnily enough, Ambrose Barrow was her first teacher. She went so far with him and then he couldn’t teach her any more. It looked as though she’d come to the end of her young career. I was only a sergeant

at the time and the fees of college or special professors in London or such places were out of the question....”

Littlejohn, listening with his eyes fixed on the playground opposite, saw a master emerge from the school and blow a whistle. Whereat, the pandemonium of flying figures stopped like magic. Another blast, and they all formed marching lines and tramped into school.

“Then Francis Fenning found her. The Fennings were always a cultured lot, especially Francis and Andrew. Francis and his father were governors of the local girls’ school where Mary was a pupil and it all happened at the annual concert. I admit, she did play well.... She was thirteen, then; she’s twenty-six now. Here’s a snap taken of her about that time at a fancy-dress ball....”

Faddiman pulled a wallet from the pocket of his tunic and produced a photograph taken with an amateur camera. The girl was dressed as a red-cross nurse and facing the photographer with a sort of shy gravity, her head held high.

“Yes. Very nice, Faddiman....”

Faddiman carefully replaced the picture and put it back in his pocket.

“To cut a long story short, Francis Fenning, who was a musician himself, paid her fees to the Academy at London. They made a first-class player of her. It later turned out that whilst she was in London—she went when she was sixteen and spent three years in College and two with a private tutor—when she was in London, Francis used to go up and take her about a bit. He was getting on for forty, unmarried, and a man of the world. He gave her poise and taste and culture and saw to it that nothing spoiled the natural charm she had. I say this, although I’m her own father. She was always a good child and she’s grown up into a good woman, although she’s suffered a lot.”

As a man, Littlejohn was very interested. He’d taken a liking to Faddiman as soon as he met him. Now, in this new light, he liked him better still. But as a police officer, Littlejohn wondered what all this history was about, how it affected the case, and how it was going to end.

“She was soon playing at concerts all over the place. I’ll show you the press-cuttings I’ve collected, one day. She was a great success. She left here rather a plain girl. You’ll see from the photograph she looks just average-nice, doesn’t she? She came back a beauty. Although I say it myself, she grew up into a very lovely woman. Francis Fenning fell in love with her and



asked me if he could marry her. There's no doubt about it, she was in love with him. You knew it when you saw them together, not by the fuss they made or any undue show of affection, but there was a sort of oneness about them, a tranquillity they had in each other's presence, as though they thought the same thoughts and saw everything with the same eyes."

Faddiman absently took a cigarette from his drawer. It had a cork tip and he put it in his mouth and lit the wrong end. Then, as though nothing had happened, he reversed it and lit the right end.

"I was very put-out. The twenty years between them bothered me a lot. But my wife didn't seem to mind. Happiness of their kind doesn't grow on trees for the gathering, she said, and rarely comes to anybody. Let them take it. She was right. They got engaged. I always remember the pair of them. She was very proud of Francis. As well as loving him, she sort of looked up to him as the one who had given her real life and happiness. And he was proud of her beauty and talent, and relied on her. He was a bit of an impulsive and temperamental chap, prone to rashness. She kept him right, for she had a good fund of native wisdom, tact and shrewdness. Francis was always telling me that. He was killed in a hoist accident at the mill just before the wedding day...."

"I'm sorry.... What happened to Mary?"

"She married Oscar Fenning, the youngest son, about her own age. He'd been in love with her, but they all knew she was Francis's girl. The family were very fond of her. They wanted her with them. She told me quite plainly she'd never love anyone but Frank, as she called him, but was fond of Oscar. Oscar knew and accepted it. They got married and he was killed in the war. So there you have it. Mary still lives with the family at the Hall."

"What sort of a man is old Mr. Fenning?"

"Hard as nails in business. A perfect tartar and the hands at the mill are scared stiff of him. But he dotes on his family. Had a stroke when Oscar was killed, but still carries on. A tough nut."

"Andrew and James I've met. Andrew follows in Frank's footsteps, does he? A bit artistic and dilettante...."

"Yes. But Andrew's fond of the women. Married an actress who lives in London still. Frank hadn't much time for women, I gather, till he met Mary."

"And what of James?"

“The business man. Following in father’s footsteps, so to speak. He’ll be like his old man when he reaches that age, if he does.”

“Also a sower of wild oats?”

“If he sows any, he does it on the quiet. Not like Andrew, all over the shop.”

“I see. And now for the crime. Did you arrive at a position where Mrs. Barrow entered into the reckoning and, instead of being robbery with violence by the little spiv, it looked very much as though the Fenning family might be involved, either through some sort of intrigue with Flo. Barrow, or else a blackmail affair?”

“Yes. I brushed aside the spiv early enough and soon unearthed the joint history of Mrs. Barrow and Andrew Fenning. As far as I could gather, Andrew had been trying to follow in Frank’s footsteps and give Flo. the benefit of his own taste and position. But it didn’t come off. Flo. was of the unsettled, guttersnipe variety, an unpleasant sort of woman, whom the relationship with Andrew didn’t tranquillise, but made discontented, with an appetite for more and more....”

“That’s how it was you were so rude to her on the day I arrived?”

“Yes. I can’t stand the woman. Barrow was a decent, ordinary sort of chap, content with his lot and his music, who happened to get infatuated with her. I guess Flo. married him either out of pique against Andrew for something, or else as a stepping-stone to higher things. She gave Ambrose merry hell and he turned to a better girl for consolation, the little Lackland girl down at the mill. Nothing wrong, but just... well....”

“I know. I heard all about that, too, from Miss Lackland herself.”

Faddiman’s eyes opened wide.

“You don’t let the grass grow under your feet, do you?”

“No. Who are these Lacklands, by the way?”

“A very respectable family. Father’s Borough Accountant here. A stern, religious man, who rules his family with a rod of iron. Or tries to do. Vera, the youngest daughter’s a bit of a lively spark. I don’t think the old man knows much about the life the girls lead. I expect he thinks they’re going to something at the Sunday School when they go out at night.”

“Are there only two children, the daughters?”

“There’s a son, too. Claude. He’s something in the Civil Service in London, I think.”

“Did you see the family?”

“No. You understand my dismay when I found the Fenning family among the likely suspects? I didn’t know what to do. It involved Mary and all that. Awkward, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s better faced by an outsider like myself. I’d better get along to the Hall, then, and have a word with Andrew and James if they’re in....”

• • • • •

Littlejohn showed Andrew the cloth cap handed to him by the engineer at the mill.

“Have you seen this before, sir?”

“Yes. It’s an old one of mine. I took it down to the office ages ago, and left it there. Why?”

“It was fished out of the mill reservoir just after the crime.”

“What of it? All kinds of things go in there. Dead cats, rubbish of all sorts. It might have been there for months.”

“Oh, no. They’d have spotted it before from the engine-house. Besides, it was weighted down with a lump of iron, as though somebody wanted to be sure it would sink.”

“I’m afraid I know nothing of it. Sorry.”

“Where were you on the night of the murder, sir, between, say, five and six-thirty?”

“Here at home, with the family. We dine at six. We were all in, waiting for the meal.”

“By ‘in’, do you mean in each other’s company or just about the place, sir?”

“Oh, about the place. We had to tidy up for the meal.”

“So, I guess none of you could find a real alibi, then?”

“No. Why, are we suspect?”

“No, sir. Just a matter of formality. Is Mr. James in, sir?”

“Not at the moment, but he’s due any time. Want to ask him the same question? The answer will be the same, I’m afraid.”

“Have you any personal views about how Barrow might have met his death, sir?”

“Why should I have any?”

“He was one of your workmen. There may be something in connection with his job or relations with his colleagues which might be useful.”

“I can’t think of any.”

Andrew Fenning had a shrewd, intelligent face and listened keenly to Littlejohn’s questions. The Inspector soon formed the opinion that here was a man who would be quick to spot the relation of cause and effect and find intellectual enjoyment in doing it.

Yet Andrew had nothing to say.

James entered shortly afterwards and he had nothing to say, either. Yes, he had been at home, too. It was a bad day and he’d been reading during the afternoon. The family didn’t follow one another all over the place. How did they know they’d be expected to produce an alibi when one of their men got murdered? James got a bit impatient about it all. He laughed scornfully when shown the cap. What was that object? Never seen it before in his life. “Not even on Mr. Andrew’s head?”

“I don’t remember it. Must have been a long time ago.”

Finally, old Mr. Fenning was brought in in his wheelchair. He’d heard the police were there and wanted to know what it was all about. He sat there huddled among his rugs, deaf in one ear, blind in one eye, the use gone from his left side. And yet, as keen and peppery as ever. He had a rugged, hard face, like a gargoyle.

“What are you botherin’ us for?”

He spoke clearly through one side of his mouth.

“Just a matter of form, sir.”

“Form. Form. *What’s* a matter of form? I think this is a piece of impertinence....”

Goodness knows where it would have ended if Mary hadn’t come in, soothed down the old chap, and wheeled him off, protesting like a child being hustled away to bed.

“Come along now, dear. The Inspector has his duty to do.”

“Duty. Duty. I’ll give him duty....”

“Now, don’t be naughty. I’m a policeman’s daughter remember, father.”

Old Penning was still protesting and storming as his small tumbril was pushed off to a place where he had been told his medicine was waiting for him.

“To hell with the muck! Doesn’t do me any good....”

That was the last they heard of him.

He died that night, and his medical attendant refused to issue a death certificate.

## CHAPTER TEN

# NUX VOMICA

OLD Mr. Fenning was a very independent and stubborn man. Every night at exactly ten o'clock, the chauffeur called to carry him up to bed. He would have nobody else. He couldn't negotiate the stairs under his own power, but once in his room, he insisted on washing and undressing himself, operations which he performed slowly and with clenched teeth sometimes. The mention of a nurse threw him into a violent rage. "I'll turn up my toes and die when I can't do things for myself," he said.

Every night Mary went to see that he was safely in bed. And about midnight, when the family retired, they called in old Fenning's room to have a last word with him. He waited for it.

Mr. Fenning was a homœopathist. Whilst accepting the treatment of his own doctor, an orthodox practitioner, he always said he could manage better himself. He always knew more than anyone else. So, he treated himself in his own fashion, with pillules from his private medicine chest. At the time Littlejohn visited the Old Hall, its owner was taking Nux Vomica pillules for dyspepsia. He frequently suffered from it. He was, in his fashion, an epicure, and although his bodily inactivity was not conducive to much strain on his digestion, he insisted on dishes and wines which the doctor swore would one day kill him.

When Andrew, the first to retire this night, called to see how his father was, he found him writhing spasmodically in bed. Andrew thought it was another stroke and sent for the doctor at once. The old man died before he arrived.

Dr. Mabane threw up his hands in horror when he heard of Mr. Fenning's end.

"That's not a stroke.... It sounds like poison to me. I'll have to notify the coroner...."

Old Mabane was on his last legs, too. He was a tall bag of bones whose hands trembled as he took pulses and auscultated and who had to think a long time before announcing a diagnosis. This time, however, he wasn't long in sending for the police. And he didn't leave the death-room until they came.

"It sounds like strychnine to me," he announced pompously. "The post-mortem will probably confirm that."

“What’s this?” said Littlejohn, picking up from the bedside table a small bottle half-full of pills. “This is labelled Nux Vomica. Has he taken it himself and where did it come from?”

“Tut, tut,” croaked Mabane. “Those are only homoeopathic things. There’s only a microscopic quantity of strychnine in those. The whole bottleful would only give you stomach-ache. They’re freely sold by certain chemists.”

“Why are they here, sir? Have you prescribed them?”

“Certainly not. Mr. Fenning used to get them from Wills, the chemists in town. He had a book of homoeopathic treatment and insisted on doctoring himself. I didn’t object provided he took my medicine as well. It did him no harm to play at curing and it didn’t do to cross him or argue. He was so stubborn.”

The police doctor arrived and confirmed the G.P.’s findings. It looked like strychnine poisoning and an autopsy would be necessary.

“Who saw him last?” asked Faddiman, standing with his daughter by the bedside.

“I found him in the throes, so to speak,” answered Andrew. “I thought he’d had another stroke.”

“Who was in before that?”

Mary said she was.

“And were the pills then on the bedside table?”

“Yes. He took three whilst I was here.”

“Where did he keep them as a rule?”

“In his pocket when he was out. He took them from time to time. Then, when he came to bed, he put them where you found them to take in the night if he needed them.”

“So, they were accessible to anyone?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Mabane, gathering his tackle together tut-tutted again.

“But I’ve already said, they’re quite harmless. He didn’t get poison that way.”

“That remains to be seen, doctor.”

“The pills are quite harmless. In fact, I question whether they have any drugs in them at all. Perhaps it’s faith-healing....”

Andrew, James and the chauffeur were also there.

“Did anyone see the old gentleman just before Mrs. Fenning came to his room?”

“Both Andrew and I did,” said James. He looked annoyed at the questioning. He resented the suggestion that anyone in the family might have killed his father.

“Were you here long?”

“I called for five minutes and Andrew was up for about the same time afterwards. He always liked a bit of a chat on the day’s affairs.”

“Did he say anything particular to either of you?”

No. Both brothers had heard the same tale. The old man had been going through the books at the office and had found them untidy and altered. He had complained.

“Did he refer to the alterations said to have been made by Barrow?”

“Yes. And what do you mean by ‘said to have been made’? I thought there was no doubt about it....”

James was irritable again.

“That remains to be seen, sir. Did your father mention the particular alterations?”

“No. Just a general complaint.”

“Did he raise it with any of the office staff?”

“How should we know? We weren’t in when he called and he didn’t tell us.”

“Very well, sir.”

The old man’s room was the first past the top of the stairs. It was easy of access and the best room in the house. It had a private bathroom attached. The police examined the whole suite, but found nothing of interest. A number of chiming clocks struck two before enquiries ended for the time being. Nobody had seen anyone enter the bedroom except the family as already stated by them. The servants were sure of it. The chauffeur said that when he carried Mr. Fenning to bed, he seemed well.

“Full o’ beans, is what I’d call ’im.”

Falshawe, the chauffeur, was a little spindleshanked man. He had once been a lorry driver at the mills and had been promoted to be personal servant to his late master. He had a thin, hatchet face, a pointed chin and his nose was slightly askew. His little eyes missed nothing.

“You were very much attached to Mr. Fenning?”

“Yes.”



Just that. Yes; with a wealth of meaning.

Nobody seemed particularly stricken by the event. After all, the old man had been at death's door several times and had returned, if possible, more obstreperous and stubborn than ever. It was almost as though they expected his resurrection again with the usual unruly and sarcastic commentary. But this time, the body was removed to the local morgue. Littlejohn pocketed the bottle of pills, too.

"Did Mr. Fenning have his supper in bed?"

"Yes," said Mary. "I gave it to him and sat by him as he ate it."

"What was it, please?"

"Chicken sandwiches and a glass of malted milk."

"Queer combination. Did he enjoy them?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, please, where they came from and who prepared them."

"Cook had gone. She doesn't live in. So, I made them just before I took them up. I cut the breast from the chicken and made the sandwiches. I got the milk for his drink from an unopened bottle and the malted milk from a jar in the kitchen cabinet."

"And brought them straight here?"

"Yes. Nobody but I touched them."

"What's the meaning of all this? You're not suggesting that one of us did this thing...?"

James thrust his face close to Littlejohn's.

"Don't be fussy, Jim. The Inspector has to ask these questions. It won't mend matters to be obstructive."

Andrew looked anxious to get it all over and go to bed.

"Who removed the glass and plate?"

"I took them away with me," said Mary. "They'll still be on the kitchen table ready for the maid to wash in the morning."

She accompanied Littlejohn downstairs. The dishes were where Mary had said they would be and they brought them back with them.

The next day, the flags in the town were half-mast; the autopsy revealed strychnine poisoning; the homoeopathic pills were analysed and among half a bottleful of innocuous ones, a solitary pillule of five grains was discovered.

Someone somewhere in his journeys had tampered with Mr. Fenning's apparently harmless medicine and introduced a lethal pill or two among the

rest. Enquiries at the chemists and by telephone from the makers assured the experts that it was impossible in the course of manufacture to make a mistake. The unmedicated sugar pillules were soaked in a solution of a certain percentage of the drug and could not absorb enough to prove fatal.

At Fennings' Mill, Littlejohn saw Miss Lackland again.

"Yes. I remember Mr. Fenning being carried in the office. He had heard the books had been falsified and called to see where. I was having lunch, but left my meal to get him what he wanted. He saw the stock-book which Ambrose was said to have altered."

"Did he say anything?"

"No. But he grew quiet and serious. He was quieter than usual.... Oh, yes, and he asked if Mr. Barrow used one of those new stylograph pens. I said he didn't. He used an ordinary fountain-pen which he filled with ordinary ink here."

"May I see the books...? Especially the stock-book...?"

They were brought to Littlejohn. He could not be certain, but it looked to him, too, that the alterations had been made with one of the new patent pens.

"I saw Mr. Fenning testing the ink by wetting his finger...."

Littlejohn made the same experiment. The ink of the alterations left an impression; that of the original figures didn't. A shrewd old bird was Mr. Fenning!

"I'd better take this ledger with me, Miss Lackland...."

"But I daren't. Mr. James would...."

"This is my responsibility. I won't keep it for long."

"Very well...."

"Did you happen to see Mr. Fenning taking pills whilst he was here, Miss Lackland?"

"Why, yes. He was always taking some pills or other. He had a little bottle with him and put it on the top of his desk as he examined the books."

"Did he leave it there?"

"I don't know."

"Was anyone with him?"

"Mr. Carter, the cashier. I'm his assistant."

"Is Mr. Carter about...?"

Mr. Carter arrived. A tall, grey, faded man, with weariness and failure written all over him. His long nose was purple from cold and bad

circulation and he wore a tattered office jacket with pins stuck all over the lapels.

“You wanted me?”

Carter kept screwing up his nose as though it itched violently and with each twitch he would close his eyes tightly. In time, you felt like doing the same thing yourself and had to fight against the inclination.

“Mr. Carter, were you in with Mr. Fenning, senior, when he examined the books yesterday?”

The cashier contorted his features and pulled hard at his nose as though trying to remove it from his face. He had a pompous, condescending way with him. He did a lot of reading in his spare time and thought himself highly intellectual. Detectives weren't usually very well read. Mr. Carter was lofty.

“Well.... I was with him for a time. But he dismissed me. I'd other important things to do. Miss Lackland stayed to deal with anything he might have wanted.”

His voice was nasal and affected.

“Did you see a bottle of pills on the desk when Mr. Fenning was here?”

“Homoeopathic ones...?”

He mouthed the words ponderously.

“Yes.”

“Yes, I did. He took a dose and then put them back in his pocket.”

“Did anyone else go in the room besides you and Miss Lackland?”

“No. No they didn't.”

Mr. Carter looked in a perfect agony of nasal itch and contortion. His mouth and eyebrows joined the general convulsion.

“No....”

Littlejohn left the mills feeling more at sea than ever. Incident piled on incident and, as yet, not a single trail had appeared.

At the hotel he found a letter from his wife waiting for him.

Another constable had been shot! This time near Hungerford Bridge. Right on the doorstep of Scotland Yard.

The Inspector had thought of sending for Cromwell to give him some help. Now he wouldn't. For the time being, the Brockfield murder took second place. Somebody had shot a policeman and probably it was an officer Littlejohn knew.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## INQUEST AND OTHER THINGS

WHEN Littlejohn woke up, the first thing he saw was the brass knob at the foot of the bed. He screwed up his face in distaste.

But he felt better. The sun was shining as he drew the curtains. Below, across the street, the brushmaker and his girls were just starting sticking bristles in their brushes again. The rain seemed to have washed the street and the atmosphere, and everything looked brighter for it.

The maid brought a can of hot water and Littlejohn shaved, bending gingerly before the dressing-table mirror because the hinges were loose and the glass wouldn't stay where you put it. He had to switch on the electric light too in spite of the sunshine for someone had conceived the bright idea of putting the dressing table in the very spot where you stood in your own light.

Littlejohn chose a shirt and tie with care. He hoped he wouldn't be here much longer. He was fed-up with the place and his stock of clean linen was going down. He'd have to write home for more and he didn't like the idea. It seemed to carry with it the seeds of a long stay.

He slipped his trousers out of the portable press he always took with him. You never find Littlejohn looking as though he'd slept with his clothes on. He had an idea that being well-groomed is a tonic in itself.

Somehow he hadn't yet found anything in the case to fasten on. With patience, he knew that eventually something would come, but patience was a decided virtue in a town like Brockfield. Already, outside, somebody's chimney was on fire and bathing the nice clean street with a film of soot and a cloud of smoke. The brushmaker rushed to his door, examined the chimneys for the guilty one, found it was his own and tore inside again presumably to apply remedies or denounce somebody. All his assistants came into the street to look at the phenomenon, held a meeting and were called to book by their employer who, shovel and rake in hand, was probably trying to get up the chimney before the police arrived. He was too late, however. A young constable, book in hand, was already on the trail....

Ambrose Barrow is strangled whilst selling cloth to a spiv on Saturday night. The spiv was such a poor little shrimp physically that he couldn't have done it without rendering Barrow senseless.

Who else wanted to kill Barrow?

Andrew Fenning, who was presumably in love with Barrow's wife? But why kill Barrow for that? Was he blackmailing Andrew, or had he and Penning had a row and fought about it? Andrew Fenning had no alibi except his brother's word that they were at home together at the time of the crime.

What was Flo. Barrow doing with James Fenning when Littlejohn called at the office? Of course, it might have been a settling-up of her husband's affairs. But was that all?

Then, there was the affair between Barrow and Miss Lackland. Had a member of her straight-laced family intervened and settled Barrow's hash?

The disguise. This had presumably been put on by the murderer after Barrow's death. The method indicated this. Had the man seen entering the mill about the time of the crime, by the little clergyman, been the murderer? And, having known he'd been seen entering, had he transferred his disguise to the dead man and made off another way? The only other way was by the river bank.

Littlejohn went down to breakfast pondering the case. There wasn't as yet a single line to follow.

Downstairs the landlord was talking in the dining-room with a man Littlejohn hadn't seen before. He was tall, dark and pale. He had a shifty look and his clothes were shabby. He had a case under his arm.

"This is Dr. Martindale, sir. Inspector Littlejohn, on the Barrow murder, you know...."

The landlord introduced them quite proudly. He'd been drinking already. So had the doctor.

"Had to call in the doctor to my wife this morning. Got a touch of bronchitis and had a bad night...."

He said it to Littlejohn with alcoholic confidence as though they'd been bosom pals for years.

The doctor looked anxious to get away. Littlejohn caught his queer look and could have sworn he saw vague fear in it.

"I must be going.... More patients to see. Tell your wife to do as I say and I'll be in again in two days. Goo' morning...."

He bustled off without another word.

"Good doctor, but a bit on the loose. He comes here a lot, so when I can, I put a bit o' business in his way...."

The landlord laughed hoarsely at his own joke and went to see about Littlejohn's breakfast. It wasn't worth mentioning. Sausages or something.... It made Littlejohn eager to solve the case and be off.

The inquest on Miles Fenning was held in the new courthouse. The coroner's court was a lofty room, panelled in new pitch pine with a strong aroma. The acoustics were poor and everyone had to shout because the height made it resonant.

Littlejohn picked up Faddiman and they in turn were picked up at the door by two constables, one with a highly polished bald head and the other with a bad cough which later caused no end of irritation to Mr. Erasmus Bisby, the county coroner.

Mr. Bisby was a tall, thin man who looked like a clothed skeleton. He was very worried about his weight for, in spite of the fact that he had an appetite like a horse, which his wife tried to satisfy by frequent and expert excursions into the local black market, Mr. Bisby never added even half an ounce more tissue to his bony frame. That morning, fresh from his bath, he had weighed himself on the bathroom scales, and found he'd lost half a pound! He was almost too distressed to conduct his enquiry, although his doctor had reassured him when he found him first on the mat that morning.

The first thing you noticed when you met Mr. Bisby was his collar. Like a section of a stiff linen drainpipe and almost, it seemed, as he sat there high above the rest, six inches high. Mr. Bisby's head and neck projected from this adornment like those of a snake emerging from a gun-barrel. And, unable at its normal length to bend his neck far enough over the obstacle to see to write, Mr. Bisby had, when making notes, to stretch his neck over the edge of his collar with such force that he looked to be in the process of decapitating himself in a very novel way.

Faddiman was busy making a statement concerning the state in which the police found Mr. Miles Fenning. Dr. Mabane followed with his version, and then the police surgeon, who confirmed Mabane's diagnosis of strychnine poisoning. At least five grains had been administered, presumably from the homoeopathic medicine bottle. Dr. Mabane, who despised homoeopathy, hoped in his heart that the pills themselves would prove to be carelessly made and cause a scare. That would teach people to mess about doctoring themselves and trying to be professionals....

But a chemist, rushed post haste from the apprehensive pillmakers, soon made it clear that the mistake could not possibly have been theirs. Why,

they'd been making pills regularly for more than sixty years and never a complaint before!

Mr. Sandiman, solicitor to the Fenning family, asked a few questions, just to show he wasn't letting the grass grow under his feet. He was a small, portly, self-important man whose wife bullied him. So he took it out of whoever else he could. He tried to browbeat the pillmakers' assistant, but failed. Following Mr. Sandiman another solicitor, Mr. Barnard Dobb, appearing for the chemist who had sold the pills because the chemist was scared to death lest somehow he'd mixed strong pills with homoeopathic ones. It didn't seem at all possible that such a thing had happened, but Mr. Wills, M.P.S., thought he might have done it in his sleep or after a night with the Buffaloes at *The Queen Anne*.

Mr. Bisby was vaguely aware that something was going on and someone was talking. He stretched his neck far over his collar and wrote something down among his notes. Had he stopped eating something which had kept up his weight? He surely hadn't taken more exercise; in fact, he'd taken less than usual since last he'd weighed himself.

"Please speak up, Mr. Dobb...."

Mr. Bisby said it to try and prove that he was listening. He was vaguely aware that neither Faddiman, the pillmakers, Mr. Wills, Mr. Sandiman nor Mr. Dobb had administered poison. He had been asked by the police to adjourn *sine die* for enquiry. He'd give a certificate for burial and then pack-up. Maybe, this was his last inquest. If he'd lost that half pound from some internal complaint, perhaps a malignant one, he'd soon be turning up his toes.... Funny if they had to have an inquest on *him*. Mr. Bisby smiled a hopeless, wintery smile just as Mr. Dobb was saying that Mr. Wills couldn't possibly have done it. Mr. Wills, M.P.S., who was sitting in court in a state of dread, noted the coroner's expression and put it down to scepticism. He therefore expected arrest as he left. He said his prayers, for he was a religious man.

The attendant constable kept coughing. His noise rang round the lofty room until now and then it sounded like the feeding-time for the sea lions at the zoo. In the end Faddiman himself went and sent him home and told him to stay there till his cough was cured. It was a smoker's cough as it happened and the man was away three weeks. ....

How was Mr. Bisby to know that his young grandson had been pulling his bathroom weighing-machine to pieces and putting it together again and



that allowing for that, he'd put on three ounces in the last fortnight. He just couldn't bring his mind to Mr. Miles Fenning. First Barrow, then Fenning and then.... Mr. Bisby saw in imagination, his own cortege passing through the town-centre on its way to the cemetery.

"And in my opinion, the pills of strychnine must have been introduced into the bottle after purchase. They could not have been put in before...."

"Speak up, Mr. Dobb...."

Mr. Bisby looked over his collar like a tortoise suddenly awakening from long hibernation and wrote down a few hieroglyphics. He alone knew what they meant. "9 st. 3½ lbs."

The coroner's jury had been listening portentously. They were local tradesmen for the most part. They kept looking at Mr. Bisby for enlightenment and guidance but like hungry sheep, returned unfed. One of them, a local barber, was against the rest, because none of them ever patronised him for a haircut or a shave. Even Mr. Bisby went to a rival. And yet they'd had the cheek to call him up for the jury. It wasn't good enough. One good turn deserves another. He would vote against the rest. He didn't get a chance. The inquest was adjourned.

Mr. Bisby went to another doctor who weighed him and found he'd gained a few ounces since the last statistics were taken. Mr. Bisby was so pleased with this, that after confirming the result and finding he hadn't been cheated, he went home, kissed his wife, told her the good news and bought her a fur coat. He also remembered something he'd overheard at the Solicitors' table before the case began. It was one of those peculiar things you hear when you're paying no attention and your mind's occupied and then, suddenly later from nowhere, it comes back to you.

He remembered Mr. Sandiman and Mr. Dobb meeting in court before the police arrived. Dobb was a cheeky young upstart who'd once been a solicitor's clerk and suddenly decided to become a solicitor himself.

He was a sort of working-man's lawyer. All the small tradesmen used him when they wanted to sue anyone and the local drunks and housebreakers went to him if they thought he could get them off. He was flabby and self-opinionated and always wore a black jacket and grey striped trousers, as though ready for a small-town wedding at any time. There was always dandruff on his collar, too. Yet, he was all-there in court. You couldn't say he wasn't.

Suddenly freed from its burden of anxiety Mr. Bisby's mind allowed Mr. Dobb to enter.

"Well.... This is a pretty kettle of fish," he had said to Sandiman.

Sandiman was the dean of the legal faculty in Brockfield and looked down his nose at Dobb.

"Why?" he said.

"Old Fenning dying. And just as I was beginning to get some of his business, too."

That was a thrust for Old Sandiman. He thought Fennings, family and mill, couldn't get along without him.

"What do you mean? I'm the Fenning family solicitor. What would they want with you?"

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Fenning wanted to add a codicil to his Will. Whether he rang you up and found you out, or whether he wanted new blood, I can't say. He asked me to do it."

"I don't believe it!"

Mr. Sandiman's already alarming blood pressure rose a few more points and he pawed the air as black dots swam before him.

"It's true. Why should I tell you, if it's all a make-up? The old man's dead and I've lost the chance...."

"What was the codicil about?"

"Fancy you, a lawyer, asking me that? You ought to know better."

And old Sandiman had turned his back and walked away in a tantrum.

Yes, yes, thought the re-invigorated Mr. Bisby, I'd better let Faddiman know. It may help and it may not.

Bisby recollected another thing, too. He remembered Dobb, turning to his clerk, a little weazel of a man who looked more like a scarecrow than a man of law. "I bet Sandiman never had such rotten luck," Dobb had said. "It looks as if every good client we get is bumped off. First Barrow, just as we're ready to serve the papers; and now old man Fenning dies...." And the weazel had bared his little pointed teeth dangerously as though looking for prey in which to fasten them.

Mr. Bisby passed on that item of news to Faddiman, too. The coroner had long ears, but probably they wouldn't have been where they were that morning if he hadn't been stunned by losing weight. He'd been wandering about in a dream thinking all kinds of things instead of going right to his quarters.

Which was most unfortunate for whoever was busy killing prominent citizens of Brockfield.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# THE MAN WHO WENT TO PIECES

MR. BARNARD DOBB occupied two small rooms over a bank in the centre of Brockfield, You had to pant up forty stairs to get at him in his lair on the top floor.

The man who looked like a weazel greeted Littlejohn when he arrived, short of breath, in Dobb's gloomy retreat. The staircase was dark and painted a dismal brown, the treads of the stairs were bare and there was a smell of dust and decay.

Mr. Dobb had done his best. After all, he was a beginner and had to make his way. Judging from the growth of his practice, he wouldn't be long, either. Some of the older solicitors in the town raised their hands at his behaviour, but found it cost them business.

"Good morning, sir. Inspector Littlejohn, is it?"

The weazel bared his predatory teeth. He was sitting in a little office, with a callow urchin for company. Two cheap new chairs, a plain table and an enormous press for copying letters filled the room. You had to walk sideways to get about at all.

"Yes. Is Mr. Dobb in, please?"

"Yes, sir. Engaged with a client, but won't be long. Can I do anything?"

"No, thanks. I'll wait...."

The weazel smiled and nodded.

"Get up and let the gentleman 'ave your chair, Samuel. How many times 'ave I to tell you, the first lesson to learn in the law is courtesy?... Get up...."

The lad, looking like a scared rabbit, rose and brought the chair for Littlejohn. His hitherto unshaven face glistened with down. He looked hard at Littlejohn and then smiled a thin smile. He was a follower of Sexton Blake and had the weazel not been so aggressive, would have asked Littlejohn for his autograph. As it was, he grew tongue-tied, made gurgling noises and sniffed heavily.

“How many times have I told you not to sniff? Use your handkerchief, Samuel, and go see the doctor for a bottle for that catarrh. You’ll never make a lawyer with manners like that....”

“Sorry, Bister Dathadiel....”

Mr. Nathaniel looked ready to hit the boy. Littlejohn took an instant dislike to the weazel.

“How long will Mr. Dobb be?”

As if in answer, Mr. Barnard Dobb’s small room suddenly became animated. The whispering voices inside grew louder and finally audible.

“Well, pay up by Friday, or it’ll be a court case. That’s my last word....”

“But, Mr. Dobb....”

“I’m busy....”

The lawyer emerged, thrusting before him one of those poor little shopmen who never seem able to make ends meet, but would rather struggle along from hand to mouth than throw up the sponge and work for somebody else.

“Good morning, Inspector. Thought you’d be calling.”

The departing client looked hard at Littlejohn and took to his heels. You could hear him stumbling down the wretched stairs.

“Why did you think I’d call?”

“Old Bisby happened to be there when I passed a few indiscreet remarks to my clerk in court yesterday. I knew he’d tell the police.”

“Then I needn’t say what I’ve called for. Will you tell me, please, what all this Barrow divorce was about?”

“No objection....”

Mr. Dobb picked his teeth with a quill, offered Littlejohn a chair and sat himself down at a new desk already crowded with conveyances, writs, abstracts of title and ledgers. He looked to be doing all the work himself.

“What do you want to know?”

“I suppose Barrow was suing?”

“Yes.”

“Who was the co-respondent...?”

“You’ve already made up your mind on the grounds?”

“Yes. Am I right?”

“Yes. The co-respondent was Dr. Martindale.”

“Phew! How many more men in Mrs. Barrow’s life?”

“What do you mean, Inspector?”

“You know very well what I mean.”

Mr. Dobb bared his teeth in an awful grin. It was the expression he used when things were going well for his client in court and an alien witness was caving-in.

“Who did you think he’d cite?”

“What about Mr. Andrew Fenning?”

“Oh, come, come, come, Inspector. Surely not that.”

“Will you stop fencing, Mr. Dobb, and come into the open. You know all that goes on in this town, I’ve no doubt. You’ve heard of the relations between Mrs. Barrow and Fenning.”

“Yes. But surely.... Mr. Fenning was Barrow’s employer. At Barrow’s age jobs aren’t easy to change. Whatever Mr. Andrew did, he found Barrow complacent. When it came to a tumbledown doctor, the boot was on the other foot. He hit back then. Just to teach Flossie a lesson....”

“How long has this Martindale affair been going on?”

“Six months according to our reports. Now it’s all solved by the death of Barrow. They can do as they like now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Get married, if they want.”

“Will they?”

“No. The affair’s gone off the boil. Flossie’s now the sorrowing widow.”

“Another point. The codicil Mr. Fenning was going to add to his Will before he died. What was it about?”

“So, you’re on that, too. Well... I guess as an officer of the courts I ought to tell you. Though it’s not up to me to do so. I do this without prejudice and in confidence....”

“Of course.”

“Well, it provided a legacy of five hundred for Mrs. Ambrose Barrow....”

“Yes. I thought that ’ud take the wind from your sails. A bit of a corker, eh?”

“Perhaps not as much as you’d expect. All the same, it’s a bit of a surprise.”

“Looks as if the old man was trying to make amends for something, doesn’t it? Perhaps he’d got some information which cost him his life before he could make recompense for what had happened.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Dobb?”

“Now those are my private thoughts and not for publication. It’s up to you to do your own thinking, sir.”

“Where does Dr. Martindale live?”

“Across the square there. The big house with the stone curb round it. They took the iron railings away for the salvage drive and they’ve since laid in the town’s refuse dump....”

Littlejohn rang the bell at the doctor’s and the maid took him straight in, although there was a thin crowd of patients waiting for morning surgery. Surprising that a doctor so besotted by drink and his own misery should retain so many, but he often forgot to send the bill and, in his sober moments, was kind and sympathetic. He had suffered enough misery himself and understood that of others.

Shortly after arriving in Brockfield, Martindale had lost the wife to whom he was devoted. All his skill and that of the best of his colleagues had been unavailing and watching her suffering and knowing, from the curse of an over vivid imagination, the slow progress of the disease eating her life away, had, when the end came, almost demented him. He had turned to drink.

Then, years later, had arrived what seemed a cure for his despair. A young girl assistant had joined him. She had pulled him together, he had fallen in love with her and looked like starting a new life. But the effort of redeeming him, working for him as well as herself during the long period of salvation, had undermined the girl’s health. She had died in an influenza epidemic. After that, Martindale never stopped drinking....

He looked awful when Littlejohn met him. He’d been at the whisky bottle at that early hour. Tall, thin, swarthy and just past forty, Martindale had the lined face and grey hair of a man of sixty.

“What do you want,” he said.

“I understand that you are a friend of Mrs. Barrow, doctor,” said Littlejohn. He thought he’d better come to the point.

“What the hell’s that to do with you? Think I killed her husband?”

“No, sir. I’m after all the information I can get about the dead man’s family, friends and background....”

“You’d hardly call me a friend, would you? As for information, you’ll get nothing from me. I know nothing.”

“Yet, had he not died, Barrow would have instituted proceedings for divorce against his wife and named you as co-respondent....”

The doctor reeled to his feet. He had been sitting at a desk in the surgery. The desk light was on, although it was clear daylight and the sun was streaming in through the windows. He pointed a long, well-cared-for hand at Littlejohn, spreading out the fingers as he did so.

“Clear off. I’ve nothing to say. And that’s final. I’m a doctor and trained to keep my own counsel. Specially where women are concerned....”

“Very well. Where were you between five-thirty and six-thirty on the Saturday night of the crime?”

“Don’t know. And if I did, I wouldn’t tell you. You can do your damndest. Hang me, if you want. I don’t care.”

He looked as if he didn’t care, too.

“Very well, doctor. I’ll have to find out. Good day.”

The doctor didn’t answer, but stood staring after him, his hand gripping the desk for support.

He rang for the maid.

“Send in the first patient....”

Littlejohn, as he walked away, couldn’t help admiring the doctor. He might be a drunken sot, but he certainly wasn’t afraid of the police. And when anyone turns stupid and won’t talk, it’s like banging your head against a stone wall. How could he trace the doctor’s movements on the evening of the murder?

Just then, a cheerful voice greeted him.

“Good morning, Inspector.”

It was the Rev. D. Theodore Brewer, the little parson who had seen the strange man entering the mill on the fatal night. He looked very happy. In fact, it was quite a treat to meet him in present difficult circumstances. He seemed to radiate hope and good cheer.

“How are you, Inspector? Getting near the end of the case, I hope.”

He beamed and rubbed his hands jocularly. That morning’s post had brought the call from distant parts and his wife was packing already, although Mr. Brewer had yet to wrestle in prayer concerning whether or not to accept it. Judging from his bouncing joy, there wouldn’t be much wrestling.

“We’re not making much headway so far, sir. Complications keep cropping up. Thanks for the enquiry, though.”



"I'm sorry to hear it, Inspector. Truly sorry."

He didn't look it. How could he with a heart so light?

"Is there anything I could do to help?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. Oh, wait a minute.... Do you know Dr. Martindale, sir?"

"Yes, poor fellow. In spite of his wild habits, a thoroughly good sort. All the poor of the town swear by him and if gratitude and prayers were of any use.... Oh...."

He realised that perhaps he had made a heretical statement and coughed and blushed furiously.

"... if gratitude and human desires were effective, he would be a happier and better man. Nobody in want ever gets a bill from him, and I've known him, where a poor old man had no help and was bedridden, to tidy up the house, cook him a meal and then get him an attendant at his own expense. Though, I know he can't afford it. Between you and me, Inspector, the poor chap owes money all over the town...."

The little clergyman gave the last bit of information in a hushed whisper and beamed as though the news were good. Then, in a lower voice still, he added, "Drink and betting...."

"And women?"

Mr. Brewer threw up his hands in horror, as though the Inspector were suggesting some new and diabolical way of sinning.

"Dear me, no. I never heard of that. Never...."

The smile vanished as if Mr. D. Theodore Brewer realised things were serious and he must gird up his loins for the fray.

"Never!" he said firmly and stamped his foot to show he meant it.

"I heard so."

"Oh, no, no, no. Dear me, no."

At that rate they were going to be at it all morning!

"Was he friendly with Mrs. Barrow?"

"Not that I know and I would know if it were so...."

Then, the penny dropping, Mr. Brewer realised the implication of the question, and blushed. He looked around, too, as though somebody might be watching and go straight away and tell Mrs. Brewer he was talking scandal.

"No," he said in anguish. "He wasn't even their doctor. He doesn't go much to that part of the town...."

“Could you tell me, sir, where anyone who wished to celebrate or spend an evening out, would be likely to go from here? After all, there’s not much here, is there, in the way of entertainment, or even dining-out?”

Mr. Brewer beamed. He’d every cause to want a jollification after the news he’d heard that morning. A good steak and some chips, followed by ice cream. He was very fond of ice cream. And a nice little bit of cheese, with perhaps a bottle of Graves to wash it down....

“Where would you suggest, sir?”

Mr. Brewer awoke from his joyful daydream and wiped his lips with his handkerchief.

“Burstead,” he said. “A market town, and the local centre for shopping and the like. A very pleasant town with many conveniences.”

“I see....”

“Why?”

The little minister looked hopefully into Littlejohn’s face.

“I just wondered. Another thing, sir. Between you and me, I’m trying to find out where Dr. Martindale happened to be at the time of the crime....”

Mr. Brewer didn’t even ask why. He hadn’t got so far yet in his slow-moving reaction time.

“I know. Funnily enough, I know. I saw him.”

“Where, sir?”

“You recollect my call at the police station the time Mr. Faddiman was in such a bad humour? I said I was at Mr. Heading’s when the crime—or just before the crime occurred....”

“Yes?”

“Well, I left Dr. Martindale there. He was their doctor and the poor man was dying then. He stayed to do what he could. Heading died that night.”

“And you left Martindale there, sir?”

“Yes....”

“Right opposite Fennings’ Mill.”

“Yes.”

“I’m much obliged, sir. Very much so....”

“Always ready to help.... By the way, Inspector. I feel you are a very dear friend already. May I tell you a secret?”

“Certainly....”

Littlejohn wondered what was coming.

“I’ve received a call from Burton-on-the-Ash church. A fine ministry. I should leave... or I ought to say we should leave Brockfield in three weeks’ time.”

“Congratulations, sir. I’m very glad for you....”

“So am I.”

They had parted before Mr. Brewer remembered he’d neither told the deacons—who already knew without his telling them—or prayed about it. His face fell momentarily.

All the same, it was all right. A lovely morning, too. He felt as light as a cloud.

Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest, Beneath thy contemplation, sink heart and mind....

He wondered for a moment who was singing and suddenly realised it was himself.

Already people were beginning to turn round in the street and wonder if he’d gone mad.

Let them....

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## THINGS IN THE NIGHT

FADDIMAN thought it rather a tall order asking the police at Burstead to enquire round the town whether or not Flo. Barrow had been in the habit of dining or going to amusements there with some man or other, but he did as Littlejohn asked and telephoned the neighbouring Superintendent. The latter promised to do what he could.

Meanwhile, Littlejohn visited 26, John Street, which ran down the wall-side of Fennings' Mill. The houses were poor cottages, probably a hundred years or more old, in a long row of blackened brick. They were mostly occupied by operatives of the factory.

"Come in," said a voice as the Inspector knocked on the door.

He found himself in a neat room full of old-fashioned furniture. A large sideboard almost covered one side. In the middle of the sideboard, an old musical box, with ornaments, from which dangled glass lustres, under glass globes, on each side. A square kitchen table in the middle, with four plain chairs. Under the window, a sewing machine with an aspidistra in a pot on top of it. Then a horsehair couch and two horsehair armchairs on each side of the kitchen fireplace. In one of the chairs, which was a rocker, sat the only occupant of the room, an old lady with white hair and a drawn tired face.

She looked up from gazing in the fire.

"Yes?"

A small aquiline face, netted with wrinkles and two sharp dark eyes from which the light seemed to have faded.

"Are you Mrs. Heading, please?"

"Yes."

The voice was severe with enquiry. Since her husband had died there had been a lot of callers. First, relatives and friends with sympathy, then people squaring up her husband's affairs. Later had followed an obnoxious crowd asking if she were leaving the house and when would it be vacant. Some had even wanted to buy the furniture. She desired only to be left alone to think about past days, which had been happy, and, in her solitude, live them over again.

"I wonder if you could spare me five minutes of your time. I'm a police officer on the Barrow murder case...."

The old lady perked up at once. The one exciting event in the town for years was good enough to take her mind from her own troubles and get her busy on someone else's.

"Come in and sit you down...."

Littlejohn took the chair on the other side of the fireplace.

There was a teapot on the hob and an empty cup on the table. Brockfield people are very hospitable. To them a welcome includes a drink and a bite of something.

Mrs. Heading was glad the policeman hadn't come after the house. Some of the callers had argued and bullied about her remaining there alone. Even her daughter said she ought to go and live with them, and let Cousin Fred, who was getting married for the second time, have it....

The old lady poured out a cup of tea and brought a cake, which she cut and passed to Littlejohn.

"It's a bought one and isn't up to much. Once I made my own, but nowadays you can't get th' stuff...."

"This is very nice, thank you, Mrs. Heading."

It was very quiet and remote, in spite of being in a row near a mill. The only sounds when they didn't speak were the tick of the grandfather clock and the purring of a cat which, after stretching, rose and settled on the Inspector's lap.

"You've taken th' cat's fancy, I see. She doesn't take to everybody. Push her off if you don't like it...."

"It's all right, Mrs. Heading. I'm fond of cats."

Nothing was said about the crime. They sat there eating and drinking like old friends. The woman was wise and patient. There was plenty of time. She could wait.

"That was very nice, Mrs. Heading, thank you," said the Inspector at length. "I suppose now you want to know what I've called about."

"Of course, I do. But it can bide your time. I've plenty now. After minding a sick husband for three years, I've all the time in the world now he's been taken. I never knew I should miss doing for him so much."

"I'm very sorry about it all...."

"Thank you. It comes to us all, doesn't it? Funny what a shock it was, though, in spite of my knowing for years that there was only one ending. It'll be my time before long, too."

"I hope not...."

"I don't mind. Nothing else to live for now. But that's not helpin' you, mister. What did you want?"

"I believe Dr. Martindale attended your late husband, Mrs. Heading."

"Yes, he did. And whatever anybody else says about him, I've always a good word for Dr. Martindale. He did his best for my man. Never missed a day calling on him, except at holiday times, when he saw somebody else was here regular. And very few bills, too, and them small, though it wasn't for want of asking. He's been a gentleman to us, and I don't care who knows it."

"Was he here on the Saturday night Mr. Barrow was murdered at the mill?"

"Yes, he was. That was the night Mr. Heading died. Cancer, he died of, and Dr. Martindale saw to it that he had no pain. He stopped here for three hours that night. Four till seven and then straight to evening surgery without any food."

"Was he in the sickroom all the time, Mrs. Heading?"

"No. He came down for a cup of tea twice."

"When?"

"I'd say about half past five and just before he went. I can't be sure. I'd my hands full with Clem as you might imagine."

"Yes, I'm sorry to be bothering you about what must be painful, Mrs. Heading...."

"Painful, did you say? It's not painful. Clem died peaceable, thanks to the doctor. I'd got used to things over the years. It was no more painful than anything else. The hard part is being all by myself now he's gone."

"Did Dr. Martindale go out at all when he left the bedside?"

"I don't know. I stayed upstairs. My daughter made the tea for him. He was soon back with Clem, however. He couldn't have been away more than five minutes if he did happen to go out for a breath of air."

"He couldn't have got across to the mill and back, then?"

"No...."

The old woman's eyes suddenly sparkled with annoyance.

"Are you tryin' to make out that the doctor might have some hand in the murder of Ambrose Barrow? Because if you are, you're wrong. Folk can say what they like about Dr. Martindale's drinking. He's had a hard time and had a lot to put up with. But he's no murderer. Under what drink's done for him, he's a man with a heart of gold, who can't bear pain and sufferin',

either for himself or anybody else. That's what's turned him to drink. What he needs is a woman to mother him and stop him from spendin' and givin' all he earns and more besides to the first that comes with a weary tale...."

"I'm not suggesting he was a murderer, Mrs. Heading. But he has been mixed up with the Barrow family, I believe, and we must check up on everything, you know."

"How do you mean, mixed-up?"

Littlejohn somehow felt that the old lady deserved his confidence.

"If Barrow had not died, he was going to divorce his wife and cite the doctor as co-respondent."

The old woman sat back astonished in her chair.

"No! He wasn't, was he?"

And then, suddenly, she flew into a rage.

"It's them Fennings again! How is it they must always pay to get over what other people has to suffer for? Always money, money, money. The old man used to say, everybody has his price, and he never seemed far wrong."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Heading?"

"It's as plain as the nose on your face, that's what it is. Dr. Martindale never had no time for Flo. Barrow. I'm sure of that. It's them Fennings paying him to take the blame. They always do that. Pay their way out of all their difficulties."

"I'm surprised. I always thought them rather a decent lot."

"Decent lot! You don't know the Fennings. Leastways, I mean, you didn't know the old man. The lads were nothing to speak of, because he was the boss. What Miles Fenning said was law. He held the purse strings and they danced to his tune."

"Had they no money of their own, then?"

"Oh, yes. They'd what they earned. But he was owner of the mills. His sons were what they called nominal directors, but old Miles held all, or most all the shares. They couldn't turn a hand without him, I know, because I'm one who suffered."

"In what way, Mrs. Heading?"

"My Clem suffered through him. He got his illness through his work. But old Miles took it to court and made out he didn't. Clem got a miserable five hundred pounds, where he ought to have had enough to live on in comfort for life and have the best doctors and a decent home instead of this sunless place in a back street. Oh, yes. I know...."



“But Andrew seems a nice fellow.”

“He is, but he had to do what his father said, just as if he was a little lad. He wanted a fair pension for Clem, but the old man put his foot down. Now I suppose, Andrew got himself mixed up with Flo. Barrow. But you see how it was? Barrow daren’t name him. Oh, no. The Fenning name mustn’t be smirched. Barrow’s in love with Joe Lackland’s lass and wants to marry her and has a case against his wife. Leave it to old Miles; he’ll fix it. He’ll pay a drunken doctor who owes money all over town and looks like going to court about it, to take the blame and bear the mud-slinging. And his bright-eyed family get off scot-free. You met have expected that.”

“I see. So, you think Martindale had nothing much to do with Flo. Barrow?”

“Not on your life. I know him. He might get drunk, but he’s particular. Comes from as good a family as Fennings any day; better, in fact. Besides, Flo. wouldn’t look at a penniless doctor. She’s higher-flying nor that. It’s all a put-up job, I say.”

“What do you think about this murder, then, Mrs. Heading?”

“Whose?”

“Both, for that matter.”

“All I can say is, there’s been funny things going on at that mill for a while now. I’ve been up at all hours of the night tending my Clem. And somebody else has been up at all hours, too, in that mill.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mean? Many’s the time I’ve just walked out into the night air to freshen myself. I like the stillness and the quiet of the stars. Makes your sorrow seem less and your troubles smaller to see them stars and hear the quietness. But there’ve been folk about in that mill-yard. Soft footsteps, torches flashing on and off, and sometimes, yes, sometimes, they’ve quietly pushed out a motor-lorry without engine going or lights on and let it glide down the hill and you’d hear the engine start a long way off.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Not so long since. In fact, it only stopped proper after Barrow died.”

“Do you think Barrow had anything to do with it?”

“If it was anything crooked, he hadn’t. There wasn’t a straighter lad in Brockfield than Ambrose Barrow. I don’t blame him carrying on with the Lackland lass. He’d had enough to put-up-with from that wife of his. A man

must have a woman to love and tend him. Sometimes he gets the wrong'un first time; then I don't blame him if he seeks another...."

"Who was at the bottom of it, then?"

"Don't ask me. I never crossed the road to see."

"And what about the death of Mr. Miles?"

"I reckon he was so long dying and stopping making himself a nuisance to all and sundry, that somebody got fed up and helped him along. Don't ask me who. I'm no good at guessing either."

Outside, footsteps began to pass the door and then a stream of workers went by on their midday break. The buzzer had sounded, but Littlejohn hadn't noticed it. He was getting used to Brockfield and now the hooter was part of the general make-up.

The door opened and a middle-aged woman, carrying a pie-dish, walked in.

"Here's your dinner, mother...."

"Thank you, Emma. Put it in the oven. I'm just busy."

Emma gave her mother a queer look. She expected to be told at once who the visitor was and Mrs. Heading wasn't obliging. Emma was a busy, thin little body with sharp eyes like her mother's and a curious way of holding her head as though listening for something. She put the pie-dish in the oven sulkily, using her small mean hands nervously.

"You remember the night your dad died, Emma? You gave the doctor a cup o' tea about sixish. Did he go out at front door?"

"I'm sure I don't remember."

Emma was peevish and unhelpful.

"This is a police detective and he wants to know, so you'd better make up your mind quick."

The younger woman's jaw dropped and she looked ready to take to her heels.

"Come on, now. Don't be so soft. It's not like you not to know all that goes on."

"Well, he did go out, if you must know. Wanted a smoke and said he'd take a breather along street."

"How long, was he out?"

"Five minutes or so."

"Right. That'll be all, Emma. This talk's private...."

Emma sniffed.

“I don’t stay where I’m not wanted,” she said huffily. “Don’t let that pie shrivel up and then blame me. Some folks is that stubborn....”

And with that, she left.

“Emma lives next-door-but-one and if I didn’t keep her in her place, she’d run my house. Nobody’s running my house while I can move hand or foot. And don’t you think I’m like Miles Fenning, because I’m not. My childer do as they’re told because I’m their mother, not because I hold all the brass.”

She smiled at Littlejohn and they understood one another.

He decided to go a step further.

“Did you know, when he died, old Fenning was planning to leave a legacy to Flo. Barrow?”

The old lady didn’t seem surprised.

“I reckon that settles what I’ve been telling you. He cooked the business about the divorce and Flo.’s share was something in the old man’s Will. Unless, of course, there was something else on his conscience about her. I wouldn’t be surprised at that. Perhaps, even in his dotage, he took a fancy to her, too. You never know, do you?”

“Well. I’ve had quite a profitable talk with you, Mrs. Heading. You’ve helped me a lot. Have you anything else useful to tell me?”

“No. I could keep you here a week and tell you nothing good of old Miles and his affairs. But you find out all about him and what he was at and what went on in mill after dark. And then you’ll soon know who did killing. Don’t you believe anything about Doctor Martindale....”

The cat jumped from Littlejohn’s knees, strolled to the oven and started to meow.

“She wants her dinner. Will you stop and ’ave a bite with me?”

“No, thanks, Mrs. Heading. I’m more than grateful and I’ve intruded enough.”

“There’s more than enough for two of us. And don’t you talk of intrudin’ else I’ll get cross. Nobody stops here unless I want ’em to. And for a policeman, you’re one of nicest I’ve ever come across....”

They both laughed.

“Sure you won’t have some of that pie? Although you might not think it, Emma’s quite a good hand at pastry. She’ll be mad when she hears I’ve given to-morrow’s dinner to a detective, but she’ll have to be mad, that’s all. We’ll have some nice bread and butter with it and then a bit of apple pie

and cheese. I've got a cousin as is a farmer and him and me's as thick as thieves. His wife's bin doin' a bit of churning this week and he called yesterday. And cheese is from same place. I'm fond of a bit o' company of right sort...."

"All right, then, Mrs. Heading. I don't think I've had any hot, home-made meat pie since my mother used to make them."

"Sit you down, then...."

So, Littlejohn stayed.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## THE FRIGHTENED WOMAN

It was thought better for all concerned that the next interview with Mrs. Ambrose Barrow should be at the police station. It had long been realised that she was not active in the case of her husband's death with a view to helping law and order; she was out to save her own skin.

"She's too much involved at every angle to be a friendly witness, if witness you might call her," said Faddiman. "You can't press questions on people after you've been drinking their sherry and eating their fillet steaks. Hadn't we better have her in here?"

Littlejohn agreed, secretly amused at Faddiman, who never seemed to have forgiven him for enjoying Mrs. Barrow's hospitality early in the case.

Mrs. Barrow had lost a lot of her poise and elegance when she arrived. It was raining cats and dogs outside and she wore a transparent rainproof over a black costume. She had not put it on with great care and the raincoat bulged in parts, especially round the belt. She still had on the pill-box hat, but wind and weather had dealt badly with it. It was too much askew and bits of damp hair escaped from under it.

But it was her face and figure which had altered most. She looked to have spent sleepless nights and to sag with utter weariness. Her cheeks were chalk-pale and she had dark circles under her eyes. She sank into a chair with a sigh, like one exhausted after a long walk.

Littlejohn insisted on conducting the interview alone. Faddiman expected this and raised no objections. He was becoming resigned to what he thought was Littlejohn's strange conduct. As far as Faddiman could see, things weren't progressing very well for all of it.

"Mrs. Barrow, there are one or two more questions I'd like to ask you on points that have cropped up since last we met...."

Flo. Barrow looked afraid. She was evidently at the end of her nervous strength.

"I don't think I know anything more than I've already told you, sir...."

So, it had got to calling him "sir". Littlejohn noticed the change in manner. There was something pathetic in the attempt to placate him.

"In the first place, Mrs. Barrow, did you know your husband was contemplating taking divorce proceedings against you at the time of his death?"

Mrs. Barrow's white face turned grey and she clutched the edge of the deal waiting-room table.

"I.... I...."

Outside there was an open-air market in progress. Fruit stalls, men selling small wares, cheese, oat-cakes and gimcrack jewellery. Their harsh shouts penetrated into the room. The fruit and vegetable sellers were doing a roaring trade, marshalling their customers in long queues and treating them with little courtesy. Only the cheapjacks needed to tout for buyers.

"Look 'ere. I'll tell you what I'll do...."

A fat man in a bowler raised aloft some glittering brooches and began to exalt them in taste and value....

"I.... I...."

"Come, Mrs. Barrow. I must ask you to tell me the truth. We've been far too long obstructed in this case. At this rate, we shall never find out who killed your late husband."

"Yes.... I know he talked of separation...."

"This was divorce, Mrs. Barrow. He had consulted solicitors and cited the co-respondent. We know the name."

"My husband was always suspicious of me. He was very straight-laced and couldn't bear me having a good time with my friends...."

"This wasn't just having a good time, Mrs. Barrow. It was divorce proceedings and I take it Mr. Barrow would have the grounds before he saw a solicitor."

"He hadn't any grounds. I never...."

It was obvious she was playing for time. She was ready to tell any tale to get herself out of an awkward situation and protect whoever was involved in it with her.

"Very well, Mrs. Barrow. The solicitor will be called as witness at the adjourned hearing. We shall get what we want to know then."

"What do you want to know?"

"The name of the man involved."

"But if you know it, why ask me?"

She was not defiant. Only tired and plaintive. But she was on her guard, ready to prevaricate to the last ditch.

Outside, the man in the bowler hat was passing round his brooches. They were selling like hot cakes. The women in the queue at one of the fruit stalls were getting restive. The hawker wouldn't open and sell his

grapefruit. With sadistical delight, he was telling them he wasn't going to do it until afternoon. They could all go home and come back later. One of the women raised an umbrella to him and another went to bring a policeman to find out how the law stood. The constable, scenting what was afoot, looked in the other direction and pretended to hurry to business elsewhere among the cars parked in the road.

"Do you know who was cited, Mrs. Barrow?"

"No...."

"Then, I must tell you...."

She grew tense with anxiety, fearful lest the name she was hiding might next be uttered.

"Dr. Martindale!"

A look of intense relief crossed Flo. Barrow's face and her taut body relaxed.

"Well?"

"That shows what nonsense it all was. Dr. Martindale was only a friend. He isn't even my doctor. I've met him at affairs and even had a drink with him, but...."

She suddenly stopped, fearing she might be saying too much or interfering with someone else's schemes.

"But what?"

"Nothing. Ambrose was making a lot of fuss about nothing."

Littlejohn left it at that. He'd learned all he wanted to know about the question. The rest of the answer lay elsewhere.

"Are you a friend of the Fenning family, Mrs. Barrow?"

"Yes, in a way."

"In what way, please?"

She fished about for words again. She was as pale as ever and trembling, although the room was hot and stuffy. The whole business was depressing. Wringing a tale out of a woman who didn't want to tell it in a place with one deal table and two rickety chairs and an atmosphere which seemed to have been sealed in the room since the day the building was put up! There was a gas-fire in the fireplace which kept making plopping noises. Finally, the thing back-lit and hissed out a lot of half consumed gas. Littlejohn got up and turned it out.

"Well, Mrs. Barrow?"



“The Fenning family was interested in all its workpeople. Especially in people like Ambrose, who’d served them since he was a boy and risen to high rank.”

“But I believe you were a particular friend of Mr. Andrew Fenning. Is that so?”

“I was his secretary when he was mayor of the town and kept on with him till I married Ambrose.”

“Is that all?”

“What do you mean?”

She looked straight at Littlejohn in an effort to assert outraged innocence.

“You were seen about the place with him very frequently. In fact, the regulars at *The Queen Anne* still talk about it.”

“They would. I was his secretary. Naturally, he took me to tea and home, too, when we worked late. In a small town like this, they’ve nothing to do but concoct scandal....”

Judging from the scenes outside, the women, at least, had plenty to keep them busy. They were like a swarm of bees round the stalls. A pot-stall had now opened up and you could see the crowds sorting out cups and saucers, asking the prices and recoiling in horror at the answers. Then buying them.

“Let me ask you another question then, Mrs. Barrow. Were you such a friend of the late Mr. Miles Fenning as to merit his leaving you a considerable sum in his Will?”

That did it. Mrs. Barrow just slid from her chair in a dead faint. The weak spot had been struck and Littlejohn felt a bully for doing it. He rang the bell and a policeman appeared. The bobby’s eyes opened wide and looked ready to roll down his cheeks with surprise.

“What’s up, sir?”

“The lady’s fainted. Have you any brandy?”

Littlejohn left the rank and file to deal with Flo. Barrow. They were slapping her hands, trying to force a few drops of brandy between her teeth, generally rendering first-aid as taught in the regulations....

Littlejohn fought his way through the milling crowds in the town-hall square. Dr. Martindale was still in his surgery. He’d had a thick night and hadn’t got in his stride. He looked ready to murder Littlejohn when the dispenser ushered in the detective again.

“What do you want? Still badgering people about?”

“Yes. I’ve just left Mrs. Barrow. She assures me there are no grounds for divorce in her relations with you. I thought you’d like to know.”

“Very kind of you. If that’s all, good-morning. I’m busy.”

“That isn’t all. I’m here to ask you who employed you to take the blame for Mrs. Barrow’s shortcomings. In other words, someone paid you to act as co-respondent in this case. Someone who wanted to keep his own family out of the headlines.”

“Mind your own blasted business. I’m not talking.”

“I’m afraid you are, doctor. Otherwise, you’re going to court to talk there and then you’re going before the Medical Council for unprofessional conduct....”

Martindale sat down and passed his hand over his forehead. Then he took out his handkerchief and wiped away the sweat. He was in very bad shape indeed.

“I won’t talk, all the same”

“Then, I will. Ambrose Barrow knew his wife was unfaithful to him. And he knew who with, too. But there was a reason for his not instituting proceedings at once. If he cited the man he knew was his wife’s lover, he’d lose his job and he didn’t want to do that. All the same, he was determined to be free, because, you see, doctor, he loved somebody else, who would make him happy. If some arrangement wasn’t come to, Barrow would have taken the risk and left his job, but then, he’d have cited the real culprit....”

Martindale listened fascinated. It was evident that Littlejohn had hit the nail on the head. The doctor took a bottle from a cupboard and helped himself to a drink, pursed his lips and sat down again.

“Doctor, the Fenning family paid you to take the blame. They offered to pay your many debts in the town if you’d help them out. And Barrow fell in. Your name was given in the divorce papers and you’d have gone through with it if the murdered man had lived.”

“I give it up. No harm’s been done. What you said is true. I’m in a hell of a hole. That would have straightened me. I’ll have to leave town in any case now.”

“Who made you the offer?”

“Old Miles.”

“On behalf of Andrew?”

“I don’t know. It was part of the bargain that I asked no questions.”

“How much did he offer?”

“Two thousand pounds.”

“Whew! He was desperate, then.”

“Miles Fenning was never desperate. He had money and knew that every man has his price. You don’t need to be desperate when you’ve as much wool on your back as old Fenning had.”

“Did Barrow concur, then?”

“Yes. What else could he do? It’s not easy at his age to get a job as good as the one he had. And he wanted to marry the Lackland girl. Old Lackland’s straight-laced. He’d have kicked up no end of a row if Barrow had let his wife divorce him; so Barrow was determined to divorce Flo.”

Once the ice was broken and his weakening reserve overcome, the doctor was ready to talk. He looked pent-up and almost eager to confide.

“Do you remember the night Mr. Heading died? The night of the crime?”

“Yes.”

“You were at the Headings all the evening?”

“Not all the evening. In the early part just before surgery hours.”

“Till nearly seven?”

“Yes. The old man died....”

“I know. You went outside for a smoke, although it was raining....”

The doctor looked sharply at Littlejohn.

“What are you getting at? I’d been in the sickroom all that time. I wanted some air. I put on my mackintosh and hat and took a short turn along the pavement. Then I came back.”

“Was anything going on at Fennings’ Mill whilst you were out, doctor?”

“A bit of coming and going. The lodge wicket-gate was open, or seemed to be. Two or three people went in.”

“Why didn’t you tell the police of this before? Surely you knew that Barrow was killed there that night. The information might have been vital.”

“I’ve something better to do with my time than meddle in police cases. I’m working this practice single-handed. I’ve hardly time to eat, let alone read the papers or follow murder cases.”

“Who did you see hanging about the mill, then?”

“The little Jew who was killed, I should guess, judging from descriptions.”

“So you did read the papers, then?”

“Oh, hell! The thing’s been all over the town. All my patients were talking about it everywhere I went.”

“I suggest you didn’t want to get mixed up in it because you didn’t want to get across with the Fennings....”

“Think what the devil you like. I don’t care. And now, have you finished, because I’ve calls to make?”

“Just another minute and then I’ll go. You saw the little Jew, as you call him. Anybody else?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Ambrose Barrow.”

“Did you recognise him?”

“Of course, I did. I know him well. I’d know his walk, to say nothing else, among a hundred.”

“Anybody else?”

“Yes. Somebody in a cloth cap and raincoat....”

“Did you see his face?”

“Of course not. There was a street lamp in front of the mill gate, but the man didn’t obligingly turn for me to see who he was....”

“In what order did these three enter?”

“Haven’t you done yet? Barrow was the first; then the man in the cap, I think. Then the Jew.”

“Thank you, doctor. You’ve caused us a lot of trouble by not coming along with the information. In fact, you seem to have deliberately withheld it!”

“Think what you like. I don’t care. I’ve troubles enough. One more or less in addition won’t kill me.”

The dispenser put her head round the door.

“Your car’s still standing at the corner, doctor. The police....” Her face, with its large spectacles was eager with anxiety.

The doctor turned awkward.

“I’ll have a cup of coffee then, please, Miss Noakes. The blasted car can stand there until they book me. This fellow here’s been threatening me for nothing ever since he came. Now we’ll give the bobbies something proper to fine me for.”

And with a burst of cackling laughter the doctor left the room. Before Littlejohn went, he saw the doctor, hat on his head, enter the car and drive

off. Then he saw the Rev. Brewer bearing down on him again, his face beaming still, ready to announce the good news yet a second time.

Mr. Brewer looked at Littlejohn, smiled, and then looked away to watch with sympathy the doctor manœuvring his car through the crush of market traffic. When the reverend turned his head to find Littlejohn, the Inspector had vanished.

“Well, well...” chuckled Mr. Brewer. And then he started to whistle a little tune he’d heard last night at the Sunday school dance. Something about it’s being a hap... hap... happy day. He felt like that.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# THE SORROWS OF P.C. 33.

P.C. MULLIGAN would have been happy by any other name. He was naturally a simple, kindly officer, with a nice wife and family and a comfortable job as No. 33 of the Burstead Borough Police. But his name had doomed him to perpetual ridicule.

When he first presented himself, aged 19, as a raw recruit, the sergeant had laughed aloud as he wrote his name.

Willie Mulligan.

“William?” said the sergeant with raised eyebrows and streaming eyes.

“No. Just plain Willie.”

“Go on!”

And between his gusts of cruel laughter the sergeant had just managed to articulate.

“P.C. Mulligan. That’s a good one! That’ll be grand! Ever hear of *The Bouncer*?”

Mulligan, eagerly scenting his first case tracking down a murderer who committed foul deeds by beating his victims up and down on hard pavements, felt glad he’d enrolled.

“No. Can’t say I have, sir.”

“Well, it’s a comic paper. My kids buy it every week and the first thing they look for’s the adventures of P.C. Mulligan, the man with the big feet. Let’s look at yours....”

Willie Mulligan stood precariously tottering on one leg and elevated a boot the size of a substantial coalscuttle.

“Haw, haw, haw.... You’ll be the life and soul of the force. Sign here, WILLIE....”

And so it had been. All the youngsters in Burstead had been after him when he appeared on duty, bearing copies of *The Bouncer Comic* and comparing the pictures of their favourite buffoon with the living mountain of flesh as it watched the cars in the High Street or flailed the air at the traffic crossing. The Chairman of the Bench, who had a large family of

*Bouncer-reading* grandchildren, actually sniggered when Mulligan made his first appearance on a case of shoplifting in court.

To mend matters, Mulligan's first number was 49!

"P.C. 49...."

The grown-ups thus shared the mirth of the youngsters who'd never even heard the comic song. Thank God he'd now been changed to 33. But after years of haunting him, P.C. Mulligan's adventures, cuddling cooks and chasing burglars, still held the field in *The Bouncer*. Distracted, P.C. 49, now 33, had written a protest to the editor. And given a popular daily a scoop.

### P.C. Mulligan In The Flesh!

Pounding the beat in the pretty county town of Burstead is the youngsters' favourite cop. P.C. Mulligan exists there in the flesh....

And a photograph wheedled out of his wife by a wily newshawk. And now....

"Go round all the hotels and see if anybody called Mrs. Florence Barrow has ever been seen there with a man...."

The hilarious sergeant who'd signed him on, and was now an Inspector, handed P.C. 33 a description and a photograph. He still laughed mercilessly at his underling.

"P.C. Mulligan. Haw, haw, haw...."

"Some people have no sense of dignity. The big boob," thought Mulligan, saluted and went off feeling sore.

His feet were as sore as his feelings before the worry ended. He tried thirty-five pubs and hotels without success. He showed his photograph and recited his description until he knew it by heart. Some of the landlords took a long time deciding. Others gave him short shrift, for it was market day. A few offered him drinks, knowing that in uniform he couldn't take them. And one, talking to a group of commercial travellers and Rotarians, introduced Mulligan solemnly and caused the laugh of the season. One commercial asked for his autograph. "It'll please the kids no end."

At length, P.C. Mulligan called at the Swiss Restaurant, proprietor, Frank Miller. His real name had been Franz Müller, but during the 1914-1918 war, when several people threw bricks through his windows, he had decided to modify it a bit. He'd been fined for alteration without permission

and then changed it by deed-poll, greatly to the disgust of his aged parent in Altdorf, who'd written him a nasty letter of denunciation, saying that Franz was no son of his, a coward, and a disgrace to William Tell.

"Kom in," said Mr. Miller. "Long time since I see you, Mr. Mulligan."

That was better. Mister didn't cut you to the quick like P.C. Besides, Mr. Miller was too serious to read comics himself or let his seven little Millers do so. Instead, he studied Schopenhauer and Kant in most of his spare time. The rest he spent with his offspring, training them to win all the scholarships for the local High School and University, and running a small family orchestra in which each child played a different instrument and himself and Mrs. Miller the oboe and harp respectively.

Mr. Miller kept a first-class restaurant just off the High Street. It was an epicure's place, dealing in continental dishes and fine wines. The price of the meal was fixed by law, but somehow you rarely got away at less than a pound a head. The proprietor was stocky, fat and wore his hair *en brosse*. Just like the typical Hans of pre-war cartoons, even to the pipe with the porcelain bowl.

Mr. Miller was rubbing a little garlic round a salad-bowl. He halted and looked at his visitor through strong lenses.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Mulligan? A celebration maybe?"

"No. Nuthin' o' that sort. Jest a few enquiries...."

Mr. Miller had a pale face, and a red neck like a polony hanging over his wing collar. The face turned red and the polony pale.

"Hein?"

Had they caught-up with him at last?

"Jest a few enquiries *re* a certain party we want to know somethin' about. Know that face?"

Mr. Miller was still a bit suspicious. He turned to his eldest son who was laying a table for eighteen and gave him a good telling-off for nothing, just to gain time to collect his thoughts.

"Yes, father," said young Miller, a junior replica of his parent, glasses and all—they all were—and ran to the kitchen to tell his mother, who cashiered at busy times and cooked at others.

P.C. Mulligan solemnly read his description of Flo. and flourished the photograph. Mr. Miller breathed again.

"Have a drink, constable?"

"No, thanks, sir. Not on jewty."



“Chust a glass of wine. It will do you no harm. I have a nice, innocent Swiss wine. You’ll enjoy.”

P.C. Mulligan thought fast. He took a glass of port now and again at the back door of *The Jolly Tinker*, and it might as well have been milk....

“Awright, then. Just a little snifter, thank’ee.”

Mr. Miller poured some red wine in a goblet for the bobby. And one for himself.

“Long life.”

“Yore very good ’ealth, sir.”

P.C. Mulligan tried to down the fiery Rhone wine in one, thrashed the air, coughed until his helmet fell off and then stood to attention.

“Phew! The real McCoy, wot?”

“A bit fiery, but quite harmless to a man like you. Another?”

P.C. 33 didn’t mind if he did. He felt quite elevated. Let ’em all come. P.C. Mulligan, indeed! He’d show ’em. He delicately drank his second glass and grew confidential.

“It’s like this, sir. Acting for a client whose name shall, for the time bein’, remain confidenshull, we want to know if you’ve ever seen this lady ’ere with a man at any time.”

“Ah, the jealous husband, hein?”

“Well... er.... ’Nuff said. We’ll leave it at that, see?”

P.C. Mulligan tried to look wise and important.

Mr. Miller, also stimulated by his wine, started a train of thought involving the Categorical Imperative and divorce.

“Well.”

“Yes, I think so. Yes.”

“Ah.”

P.C. 33 breathed a heavy alcoholic blast of relief. His feet felt awful and he couldn’t stand much more of it.

“Thank ’ee. Don’t mind if I do. Haw, haw, haw....”

A third glass followed the rest. P.C. Mulligan looked around.

“Blessed if I don’t bring the wife ’ere on her next birthday. Nice little place you got here. Bet you know all the ins and outs o’ the black market, eh?”

No. 33 tapped the side of his bloodshot nose with an enormous index, but Mr. Miller shied off.

“Yes, I know the lady....”

“Oo? My wife?”

The bobby was past caring who Mr. Miller knew. He was thinking with bold and bitter relish of all the years he'd put up with ridicule. He wasn't going to stand it any more. Not even from Inspector Scantling, the big, giggling boob....

“No, the lady on the photograph.”

“Oh. Who'd she been here with?”

“Let me see, now. Yes. A well-known man in Brockfield....”

Mr. Miller knew Brockfield well. He went there regularly for secret eggs and pork.

“Once Mayor there, I think. Fenning, that's it. Mr. Andrew Fenning. But it was about four years ago....”

“Do you remember that properly?”

“Yes. It was during the war. Just before the bomb fell.”

They'd had one bomb in Burstead. It fell three miles away, in the country, but you'd have thought the whole town had been razed to the ground by it. They dated everything from the bomb. The current year might have been B.F. 4....

“Just the two of them?”

“I seem to recollect Mr. James Fenning with them a time or two. Yes....”

“I see.... What did they do when they came, eh?”

The constable's voice grew subtle.

“Eat. What else, except drink?”

The wine was emboldening Mr. Miller, too.

“Any private rooms?”

Mr. Miller was outraged. A good family man and a devout Lutheran, he recoiled at the thought.

“Certainly not! This is a respectable place. I have my licence and reputation to respect.”

“Nobody said you 'adn't. And don't get shirty. I got my duty to do and make enquiries.”

“But not to cast reflexions on my place of business....”

The wine and the ire rose in P.C. 33's breast.

“‘Ere. H'obstruction in the discharge o' duties, eh? You'll hear about this, Mr. Miller... or is it Muller?”

“How dare you?”

“Lemme see your identity card.”

Mulligan couldn't think of anything more humiliating for the present.

“It's at home.... And by what right...?”

“Right of an officer o' the law. I'll be in agen to see that card. Meantime, we'll jest have a look at the kitchens, *if you please*”

“I protest.... You have no right.”

But, emboldened by the potent, quarrelsome wine, P.C. 33 wasn't standing on ceremony. He strode purposefully through the service door and caught Mrs. Miller red-handed, breaking eggs for a caramel custard and with enough pork for fifty ready for the ovens.

“Wot's all this?”

The outcry of Mrs. Miller, uttered in harsh German, was swelled by reinforcements from the other four of her family present. They looked like patriots swearing on the Rütli, and their oaths were so loud that it brought in police help from the nearby traffic post.

Mr. Miller accused P.C. 33 of being drunk on duty. But Willie Mulligan, lubricated by strong red wine, had already finished a glib report on Mrs. Barrow and Mr. Miller. The former was telephoned to the Brockfield police; the latter resulted in a fine of four hundred pounds. Sometime later, P.C. Mulligan was put out of what had seemed a lifetime's misery by his sergeant's stripes.

Sergeant Mulligan! Nothing funny in that until someone wrote a thriller in which a Sergeant Mulligan was a boob and a stooge for a greater Scotland Yard Chief Inspector. Then, as the book was a best seller, all the trouble started again.

“So, it's more than four years ago,” said Littlejohn when he heard the news. “Andrew Fenning must have tired. But why did Barrow wait to cite him and why did the old man pay him off and want to recompense Flo. for something?”

Faddiman shrugged. He wasn't a magician and he certainly didn't know.

“And why did anybody want to kill Ambrose Barrow?” added Faddiman, repeating the question no amount of enquiries seemed to answer.

Littlejohn frowned.

“I wonder,” he said.

Faddiman shrugged again. The local man spent all his time wondering... wondering when the case was going to finish and Scotland Yard go home.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# THE MISSING LAUNDRY

“The writing’s Barrow’s and the normal figures, but the alterations certainly aren’t his. They’ve been done by a different kind of pen....”

The handwriting expert from county headquarters had studied the stock-books borrowed from Fennings’ Mill by Littlejohn and was in the police station returning them and making his report. He was a man with an international reputation as an engineer and held a chair in Engineering at a nearby University. His hobby was handwriting and the police used him quite a lot.

“You’ve seen the specimens of writing and figures of the directors and office staff. Could any of them have done the alterations, sir?”

The expert a bad-tempered little fat man, looked over his glasses. He seemed angry at the question, but that was his natural expression....

“It could, but it might not be. Figures aren’t like handwriting, especially when the person altering them is trying to imitate the originals and taking pains to minimise the alteration. I wouldn’t be prepared to say with any precision who had done the alteration.”

And that was that. Another blank! Faddiman thrust his hands deep in his jacket pockets. He looked sadly through the windows of his room which overlooked the Town Hall Square. The Mayor, a solicitor, was going briskly to his office; a roadman was sweeping dust from the gutter and, because he thought nobody was looking, pushing it down a grid instead of shovelling it into his cart. A dog just missed being run over by a dilapidated van, and a constable stooped to tie his shoelace, straightened himself and slowly undulated down the street. At a large confectioner’s opposite a long queue of women was holding its morning session....

“Will this thing never end? Will we never get a break?”

Faddiman said it almost to himself.

The expert looked hard at the local Inspector, closed his bag with a click, put on his hat, shook hands, and took himself off.

“Another blank!”

Littlejohn smiled.

“Don’t be downhearted, Faddiman. Something will turn up. It always does. Even now....”

“Even now, what? You don’t mean to say you’re on to something....”

“No. But I feel things are getting warm. Your men can’t trace the strychnine with which old Miles Fenning was killed. Drawn a blank at the chemists’ here and in the towns around. What about the doctors?”

“You mean....”

“I mean Martindale.”

“But surely....”

“No. Not Martindale as killer, but maybe as supplier, all unknown to himself.”

“But how?”

“I’m just going to see.”

The doctor was in again, but since his confidences of the last visit, was more friendly towards Littlejohn.

“You not finished yet?”

“No, doctor. This time on a new tack. Poison.”

Martindale looked in a bit better shape. For one thing, he was quite sober and for another, feeling a bit happier. Finding that his pay from Miles Penning wasn’t forthcoming, he had approached a cantankerous relative for a loan and been cordially received. This unexpected help had brightened up things considerably. In addition, he had been called in to the Old Hall to one of the servants who had developed appendicitis. And he had met Mary Fenning for the first time. Somehow, it had been like walking into the sunshine after leaving a dark prison. He had not had a drink since.

“Poison! What the blazes?”

“Look, doctor. I want your help. Someone poisoned old Miles Fenning by putting a strong strychnine pill in among a bottleful of innocuous ones he was taking. We can’t trace where that pill came from.”

“Well.... I certainly didn’t supply it.”

“Do you stock five-grain strychnine pills?”

“No. Who’d use a five-grain pill? That’s nonsense. I keep it in powder and liquid form, but I haven’t given any away. I control it myself.”

“Do you keep a check on it?”

“My dispenser does.”

“Before we go any farther, where were the negotiations for your part in the divorce carried on?”

“Here. Old Fenning ’phoned me about it, but didn’t say what he wanted. I was a bit off colour and ill-tempered. I said I wouldn’t call at the Hall on a

wild-goose chase. It wasn't a professional call, he said, so I told him to tell me over the 'phone or I was too busy."

"What happened?"

"The old man actually came down and had himself carried in. He told me what he wanted and I said I'd consider it. He also said he didn't want me seen about the Hall, just in case people put two and two together. Nonsense, I thought, but it was his queer way of thinking. He said he'd let me have instructions. And he made Mr. Andrew bring them, like a little messenger boy."

"So Andrew Fenning called here?"

"Yes. And later, James. There was a bit of arranging to do and the second time Andrew was out of town, so James called with the papers on his way to the office."

"Was either of them left alone?"

"Yes. When Andrew called I asked him to have a drink and went for a new bottle. When James called, I did the same. I used rather a lot of whisky in those days...."

"But not now?"

"No. That's over."

"I'm glad. Good luck."

"Thanks, I'll need it."

"Where is the poison cabinet?"

"In the corner there. The dispenser has everything but the poisons. You see, during the war I got a girl I couldn't trust. All right, but, somehow, a bit flighty. I had the poisons shifted to here and she dispensed them under supervision. I've been in such a mess, since, I haven't had time to move it."

"Have the dispenser in, will you please, doctor?"

The girl in the large spectacles was really frightened. She confessed she was loyal to the doctor. The way she looked at him, it went deeper than that.

"There was a shortage, then?"

"Yes. About ten grains."

"Why didn't you report it?"

The girl's face assumed a dogged, protective look. She gave no answer, but put her nose in the air.

"You thought the doctor would get in trouble?"

"I thought he'd made some mistake when he wasn't... well...."

"Sober," said Martindale with a wry smile.

“Well.... Yes.”

“Thank you, my dear. I’m grateful for that.”

The girl burst into tears and ran from the room.

“Well, well....”

“So somebody helped himself to ten grains. It might have been anyone, but the guessing is it’s one of the Fennings. Was the cabinet open, doctor?”

“I couldn’t really say. Sometimes I left my keys in it and, I’ll be quite frank, my dispenser took them out after locking it, and gave them to me later.”

“Very well, doctor. So you’ve never been up to the Hall?”

“Funnily enough, I was there last night and the night before. The gardener at the lodge got appendicitis.”

“Oh. Did you see any of the family?”

“Only Mary. She called me in and stayed whilst I made arrangements for the old chap to be taken to hospital.”

“Did you know the family before this divorce business?”

“Only slightly. Seen them about the town. I knew Mary from seeing her around in the old days. But she was away at school and then married into the Fenning family. I really spoke to her for the first time last night....”

Littlejohn looked hard at the doctor. Yes, he understood why the whisky days were over. Good luck to him!

“The case was a queer one. The old chap was damned ill but quarrelling with his wife like mad. The old lady kept saying it was his own fault. He oughtn’t to have worn the clothes and he kept saying they weren’t damp. The last thing he said when the ambulance took him off was ‘Tell her they weren’t damp.’ He’s doing all right....”

“What was it all about?”

“It seems one of the Fenning men had got wet-through in the rain and gave old Humphries his suit, which had lost its shape. Old Humphries kept it a day or two and then put it on. His wife played merry hell and said it wasn’t dry. The old man gave himself a real chilling with it in his stupidity and got a thorough cold. His appendix must have been a bit abscessed from the start, and suddenly flared-up....”

“Well, well. That’s very funny. Thank you, doctor. And good luck again.”

“Thanks, Inspector. I shall need it, as I said before.”

“I’m not so sure about that, doctor. Go to it!”



And the Inspector made for the door and was out before Doctor Martindale understood what he was driving at.

Mrs. Humphries at the Old Hall lodge was still very bellicose. She was a prim, little, grey-haired body, soured a bit and fond of her own way. She had a long tongue which never ceased and it was said that Old Humphries was such a good gardener because he kept out of her way from rising until bedtime. You'd stumble across him talking to his flowers and telling them his troubles.

"He'd himself to blame. He would wear the suit. Peacocking about in Mr. Andrew's expensive suits like a lord. Served 'im right. Though I will say to see him took off like that gave me quite a turn. But I weren't afraid. His father and his father before 'im saw ninety and Abram's only seventy-four. Them Humphrieses need a lot o' killin'. Take my word for it. He'll see me off and marry again, I shouldn't be surprised. His old father married his fourth at eighty-two. Like father, like son, I always says...."

"Just a minute, if you please, Mrs. Humphries. When did Mr. Andrew give your husband the clothes."

"He didn't. Mrs. Holgate, the housekeeper gave 'em 'im. Said Mr. Andrew threw 'em out for the ragman and she thought, maybe, Abram would like 'em. A deep 'un, is Mrs. 'olgate. Sixty and a widder. Giving my husband presents. I won't have it. Maybe, she'd like to be the next Mrs. Humphries. Well, she won't while I've the strength to 'old on. I'll outlive my Abram just to spite her."

But Littlejohn with a farewell which wasn't heard above the racket the outraged Mrs. Humphries was kicking-up, was off.

Mrs. Holgate was another grey-haired, elderly woman, a comfortable, plump, homely sort. Anything *but* a man-hunter, especially where knotted, ancient gardeners were concerned.

"Yes. I gave Humphries the suit. It wasn't fit to be worn by Mr. James...."

"Mr. James? But I thought it was Mr. Andrew."

"Has that Mrs. Humphries been talking? She always gets the wrong tale. Mr. Andrew gave it me and told me to be rid of it. But although he didn't say so, I knew it was Mr. James's. The tailor's label had been cut off, but I know whose suit's who. I've been here nearly forty years...."

"What was the suit like when you got it, Mrs. Holgate?"

"Very damp and a bit dirty, too."

“Rain?”

“I guess so. But whoever had it on, must have fallen, too. It had been brushed, but you could still see the mess. Properly soaked through. Mr. James just behaved like a naughty boy who didn’t want to be found out going in the rain without his coat. He put the suit at the back of the hot-water cistern to dry. And Mr. Andrew must have come across it and told him off and taken it. But he never found his underclothes. Proper mystery that is. His vest and pants just vanished. The suit was an old one he used for the garden at times, but the underwear was new and it on coupons. When I come to take the laundry, I couldn’t find them. And Mr. James got in a temper and said somebody must have-stolen them. But I think he got them so wet, he was afraid and burned them in the furnace...”

“Indeed! Like a naughty boy as you say, Mrs. Holgate.”

She saw him to the front door. As they passed the foot of the stairs Littlejohn paused to listen to the noise going on above. The clash of steel on steel, like the sound of swords crossing.

“You listening to ’em. They have a do every day. That’s Mr. Andrew and Mrs. Fenning. All the family is fencers and good ones, too. Mr. Andrew fenced for his college and won prizes. He taught Mrs. Fenning. She’s nearly as good as him. She likes it. Keeps her trim and slim, she says, and no doubt she’s right.”

“Does Mr. James fence, too?”

“Oh, yes. He’s very good, too. But his tempers get the better of him. Always was a poor loser. You can always tell when he’s at it. Makes twice as much noise as the others. Hell-for-leather, as my late Martin used to say.”

As they spoke, the sound of foils ceased and the two duellists came on the landing hot from their contests.

“Hullo, Littlejohn, you here again? What this time?”

Andrew was dressed in flannels and a high necked sweater. He looked pleased with himself. His crisp hair was tumbled about his face. Mary looked superb in a canary polo-jumper and short skirt.

“Excuse us, won’t you, Inspector. We’ve got to shower and change before we take cold.”

“That’s all right, madam. I do want to see you both, but that can wait.”

“Is Mr. James in, too?” he asked Mrs. Holgate when the pair had gone.

“Yes. He’s working in his study. Want to see him?”

“No, thanks. What’s he working on?”

“His book. He’s writing a private history of the Fenning family. He’s family mad. He’s been on that for the last seven years and not finished yet. You should see the papers he’s got. A lot of old rubbish about the dead past. He’d be better getting himself a wife and family to take his mind off it, instead of burying himself with his ancestors.”

And with that, she let Littlejohn out.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# THE ETCHING

THE rain was still slashing down as Littlejohn once more made his way to Farleigh Grove. This time he was on foot but wished he'd taken a taxi. He walked along the crazy path between the bedraggled flower-beds to the front door of No. 41. A bit different this time. When he was here before, he'd thought Mrs. Barrow was on his side. Now, she was hostile and afraid.

The old woman opened the door. Probably Flo. hadn't taken her into her confidence, but she knew instinctively that there was trouble brewing and eyed the Inspector with suspicious apprehension.

"She's not in...."

"Will she be long, Mrs. Harrison?"

"I don't know."

"May I come in and wait a little?"

She stood aside a little diffidently to let him enter.

The place looked exactly the same. The gloomy passage, the imitation lantern, the gimcrack oak wardrobe with the pretty little etching hanging beside it.

Littlejohn put his hat on the top of the wardrobe.

"Nice little picture...."

"Yes, so they say. I'm not much in that line myself. Like a bit of colour."

She was smiling with difficulty and trying to be pleasant. It was as if she thought that by being nice to him he would be merciful to her daughter. Littlejohn felt heartily sorry for Mrs. Harrison.

"Did your daughter buy it?"

"No. It was a birthday present."

"Is it very old?"

Silly question, but asked as a random shot.

"She's had it about... about... seven years."

You could see Mrs. Harrison had arrived at the period by remembering Flo.'s age when she got it and making a simple calculation.

"Come in here, will you? Do sit down, sir."

She was very humble about it all. Littlejohn wished he could have comforted her and reassured her. But it was no use.

The same room, with its assortment of tastes. The woodcuts, the tasteful ornaments, the heavy-framed oil-painting and the execrable carpet and suite.

"These are nice, too. Had them long? You don't see many of these now."

"About as long as the little sketching in the hall." Ambrose Barrow certainly hadn't bought them. Nor had Flo. Not with a hat like that! According to information, Andrew Fenning had been her very good friend about that time. Yes. It looked like Fenning.

Then Andrew Fenning had tired. Perhaps Flo. had resisted all his efforts to educate her. Maybe, she'd got on his nerves at last. He'd taught her to dress properly. That had been obvious last time Littlejohn was there. But beyond that.... Well.... And even in dress, bad taste would keep creeping in. The pill-box hat and the sight she was when she fainted at the police station. Yes, probably Andrew had given her up as a bad job.

But was that right? Obviously nobody was going to say yes or no to that question.

Then his eyes fell on the beautiful etching on the wall. The Whistler. What a place to house it!

"It's lovely," said Littlejohn.

"Yes, isn't it. Though, as I said, I'd rather have a bit of colour myself. But this one is a bit homely, isn't it?"

It was a picture of a passage leading to a kitchen, with the figure of an old woman on her way there.

Yes, it was homely. Exquisitely so.

And it cost five shillings.

"Mrs. Barrow told me she got it very cheaply...."

"It was a present. Her friend got it at an auction in the town. Among a lot of old rubbish."

"How long ago?"

The old lady looked hard at Littlejohn. She was puzzled to know what he was driving at.

"About two years...."

Two years! Again not Ambrose's taste, nor Flo.'s. But if Andrew had tired, then who was it? Someone else who knew what was what.

Yes, and the model gown, not quite up-to-date, but in good condition. Who'd bought her that? And recently.

“Bad weather we’re having?”

The old lady was embarrassed by lack of something to talk about.

“Yes, isn’t it? It’s hardly stopped raining since I came.”

“No. But the wireless report says it’ll be better. I was just listening-in when you came....”

Flo. was opening the garden gate. Something had happened to her over the past days. She looked older and smaller, and the head she once held high was down. Her clothes and make-up as well.... Almost like a street-walker.

She inserted her key in the front door, slammed it and entered the room. At the sight of Littlejohn she put her hand to her lips in a nervous gesture of fear.

“Hullo.... I didn’t know....”

All her self-possession had gone. She looked beaten.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Barrow. I just wanted another word with you.”

Mrs. Harrison didn’t know whether to stay or not. She looked hard at Flo. and then went out. You could hear her climbing the stairs.

“What did you want? I’ve told you all I know.”

“Not quite, Mrs. Barrow.”

“Why? Please don’t keep badgering me. It’s getting on my nerves. It really is.”

“Then, please do your best to help us. No harm will come to you, I assure you. But I want a straight tale now about your relations with the Fenning family.”

She sat down on the couch and fiddled in her handbag. It had been a good one. Another present! She took out a handkerchief, dabbed her face and then tugged at the handkerchief with her fingers.

“I really don’t....”

“Come, come, Mrs. Barrow. This won’t do.”

“Really, I seem to be blamed for a lot of things I didn’t do. Just because Mr. Andrew was good to me when I worked for him.”

“Yes. But why was Mr. Miles Fenning so interested in you as to want to remember you in his Will?”

“He must have been sorry for me with Ambrose dying and leaving me so badly off....”

“Did he leave you badly off?”

She looked at Littlejohn, trying to guess how much he knew.

“Well, I’ll have to leave this house and sell it. I can’t make ends meet and live here. I’ll have to go to mother’s.”

It all sounded very lame. Old Fenning, so hard-bitten and cynical, leaving five hundred pounds to this woman because he was sorry for her. Sounded more like conscience money. Perhaps he was just, even if he was hard.

“Let me put a suggestion to you, Mrs. Barrow. I’m sorry to distress you, but I’ve got to know what’s been going on. I suggest that, for a time, you were very friendly with Mr. Andrew Fenning. Perhaps up to five years ago....”

Flo.’s eyes opened wide and her mouth dropped. She wondered what was coming next and turned the colour of chalk.

“Then, the relationship ceased. I don’t know why, but I suggest that another man came into the field.”

“No, no, no. It wasn’t that. I swear it. It wasn’t that. It was Ambrose. He objected and threatened to make a public scene if ever he saw me out with Andrew again. So, I stopped going with him. After all....”

“After all what?”

“After all, the friendship... it was only a friendship, I swear it, after all, it was better to stop than for Ambrose to lose his job.”

“Yes, I see.”

“And that was all?”

“Yes, I swear it.”

“May I ask if these lovely collector’s pieces,” Littlejohn indicated the ornaments, “if these were gifts from Mr. Andrew... and that valuable little etching in the hall?”

“Yes. For birthdays and Christmas.”

She looked relieved. Matters were turning out nicely. Perhaps....

“And may I ask you who gave you that almost priceless etching behind you, Mrs. Barrow?”

Flo. turned and looked at the Whistler and her body grew taut.

“I... I....”

“Well?”

“I won’t tell you.”

“Surely your husband knew and your mother too. I’ll call her, then.”

Littlejohn took a step to the door.

“I’ll tell you. It was Andrew, too.”



“But why the hesitation?”

“It looks so bad. As if all the good stuff in the house had been given to me by him.”

“Did he give it to you before your husband objected?”

“Yes. About the same time as the rest.”

“That’s not quite true, is it, Mrs. Barrow? You’ve only had it two years. And your husband didn’t object to having it hung in his drawing-room. Why?”

And then, Flo. Barrow fainted again. Littlejohn called down Mrs. Harrison. The old woman was in a rage this time.

“Get out.... Get out. Haven’t you done enough? She can’t eat or sleep at night for you and the likes of you. I’ll tell my friends about you. They’ve got some influence and ’ll make you pay for this. Leave her alone and go....”

Littlejohn never felt worse as he left the house. It was bad enough sorting out who’d done the crime without having to bully and dement a lot of women.

In the town he asked the constable on point duty where the main local auctioneer’s office was.

“Right over there, sir....”

The bobby saluted and went on with his traffic directing. He flailed his arms absent-mindedly. Auctioneers now. What next? These high-ups had queer ways of investigating crime. Now, if he’d been on the job, he’d have shown ’em. A string of cars started a concerted hooting. Blimey...! He whirled his arms apologetically and saluted a glaring local J.P. as he passed.

Hacking & Co., Auctioneers and Valuers.

A small shop turned into an office with a lot of sale notices stuck on boards on each side of the door. Pictures of houses and farms pinned on baize in the window. Behind, an office and a large sale-room.

Mr. Hacking greeted Littlejohn. He looked like an ex-jockey, narrow-legged trousers and all.

“What can I do for you, sir?”

The auctioneer rubbed his hands. Houses were going at crazy prices. Three thousand pounds for a house which cost eight-fifty to build. And commission accordingly.

Littlejohn produced his warrant card. The auctioneer looked crestfallen.

“You been transferred here and looking for a house?” he asked, hoping he was right, for in his mind he was pondering his sins.

“No, hardly,” replied Littlejohn and, looking through the window at the tumbling rain and dirty buildings, almost added “Thank God!”

“Well.... What can I do for you, then?”

In the auction-room behind, things were evidently piling up for a weekly sale. All sorts of old junk, from enormous sideboards to baskets of old books. People were filing among the rubbish avidly inspecting it, eager for bargains.

“I’m just after a bit of information, Mr. Hacking. It’s quite a simple thing, but it may be like hunting for a needle in a haystack. About two years back, someone bought a picture at a sale in this town for five shillings and I think the picture’s a Whistler. In fact, I’ve seen a similar one before and that *was* a Whistler. Presumably, this is from the same plate. Can you help me?”

“Crickey! Now you’ve asked me something. We do hundreds of sales of one kind and another in the course of twelve months. Still, this most likely was in a sale at some place that mattered. You don’t as a rule pick up such good pictures at sales in small houses.... Somebody would be mad if they knew at what price that thing was sold if it was what you say. Worth a hundred quid or more, I daresay?”

“More than that....”

So, the find had not been made public. That would have attracted attention. They’d kept quiet about it and not even tried to sell it again.

Mr. Hacking walked over to a small pen in one corner and held a confab with an elderly lady who looked like his book-keeper. You could see their faces moving excitedly as they talked and then they took down a book of cuttings and a large leather-bound ledger and spreading them on the desk started poring over them.

Littlejohn sauntered across.

“We’re just looking over the sales of two years ago. We’ll see what we find in the way of pictures and then trace the buyers from the sale-book. Half a mo’....”

They suggested that Littlejohn called back, the job seemed such a formidable one, so he went first for a walk round the sale-room and then for some tobacco in the town. When he returned the pair were still perusing their records, so he looked round the junk again. His presence caused a bit of consternation among the hopeful ones there. They thought he was a new

dealer arrived to bid high and put them all out of court. One scruffy little fat chap with a bowler hat set low on his ears actually approached him.

“You a dealer, cock? Because, if you are, you and me’d better have a bit of a chat. I buy for the dealers’ ring round here and if you thinkin’ o’ buying, you’d better play ball with me. Care to come for a drink?”

Littlejohn looked at the greasy, mean face, reeking of black-market and double-dealing.

“I’m not playing,” he said. “What I buy, I’ll do on my own, thanks.”

“Oh, so that’s it, eh? Clever Dick, eh? Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you....”

The little runt sauntered off with as much nonchalance as he could muster and caused a great flurry among the dealers when he reported his conversation.

“Copley giving a bit of cheek?” asked Mr. Hacking.

“Thinks I’m a dealer and wants me to join the ring....”

Mr. Hacking laughed until they thought he was going to have a stroke.

“That’s a good one.... Anyway, I think we’ve got a thing or two here that might interest you.”

He showed Littlejohn a list of sales in which pictures had changed hands and beside each item the price paid. Nothing like it!

“Sorry,” said Mr. Hacking. “There’s only one other firm and they’re mostly farming auctioneers. You could try ’em....”

The lady interrupted, however.

“There’s just one item here that might include what you want. A bundle of old pictures sold as junk for the frames and glass. Price, five shillings....”

“Now we’re getting warm. As likely as not that’s how he got the bargain. Came across it among a lot of rubbish. They mostly do. Let’s look at my sale-book and find out who it was.”

Mr. Hacking ran a large forefinger down the columns of a ledger.

“Yes. Here we are. Bundle of old pictures.... Mr. James Fenning.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# THE CROUCHING MAN

It was evening when Littlejohn again entered the yard of Fennings' Mill. The place was silent save for the escape of steam from somewhere in the boiler house. A little hunchbacked watchman was in the gatehouse reading the paper, getting ready to fill in his pool forms. He had worked for the mills for nearly fifty years and his deformity was due to a hoist accident.

"What do you want?"

Littlejohn produced his warrant-card and said he would like to walk round a bit.

"The mills is locked-up and it's as much as my job's worth to let anybody in. Specially strangers...."

"I don't want to go in the mills. I want to stroll round the yard and buildings."

"All right, then. Can't do much harm there."

"Are you on duty all night and every night?"

"No. Five nights a week. Get Saturday and Sunday off. Another chap takes my place week-ends. Why?"

"Just interested. *Who* takes your place?"

"'ere, what's all this about? Don't like bein' quizzed. This is no business o' yours and I'm not mixed-up in it."

The local police had already questioned the week-end watchman who had confessed to being in a nearby pub taking a pint at the time of the crime. He was just getting ready to go on duty.

"Wasn't it a man called Haxley?"

"Yes. If you know, why ask me?"

"Look here, I'm a police officer investigating a murder. Do you want to help me, or not? If you don't, say so and I'll know what to do."

"I'm as keen as the next to know who did Barrow in, but I don't see what good a lot o' questions o' that sort'll do."

"Leave me to be the judge of that. Where can I find Haxley?"

"Like as not at the Church Inn, just round the corner. He's a lame chap on army pension and makes up his income as relief man for me. He's always round at the pub in the evenin's."

The Church Inn was a small pothouse tucked among a lot of old property in a poor quarter. Stone sanded floors, narrow windows and little

for sale besides beer.

Haxley was sitting in a corner with a pint in front of him. He was more obliging than his hunchbacked counterpart. But far more shifty, almost cringing.

“Yes, yes. My night on duty when Barrow were done-in. Half an hour later an’ I’d ‘a’ seen who done it.”

“Were there many disturbances over the week-end, as a rule?”

Haxley gave Littlejohn a queer look.

At the other end of the long narrow room they were playing darts. Plop, plop, and then murmurs of applause.

“Not as a rule. Why?”

“Are you sure?”

“What do you mean?”

“The little man who died in the asylum used to call there regularly didn’t he?”

“Oh, yes. Understood that I let him in.”

“Who did he call to see?”

“I told the p’leece before, sometimes the warehouseman, or his assistant....”

“Did you get your wound in the last War...?”

“Cambrai, 1917.”

“Who gave you your job?”

“Mr. Miles Fenning.”

“I see. I’ve heard that rather a lot went on at the mills at night some week-ends. For instance, lorries moving out. Know anything about it?”

“Well.... Sometimes the men went off on night journeys. What you getting at?”

“Were the night journeys strictly on the level?”

Haxley gave Littlejohn a nasty look.

“‘ere. I said wot you gettin’ at? I’m an ’onest man and when I’m on duty everything’s on the level.”

“Very well. If anything strikes you, just let me know.”

“Such as...?”

“Such as somebody taking away stuff under cover of dark that they wouldn’t have moved in the daylight. Good night.”

“Hey! Nobody ever came or went there who wasn’t one of the mill ‘ands.”

“I didn’t say they did.”

Littlejohn walked through the main gates again, past the reservoir, still steaming from the engine exhaust, and on to the far side of the mill which stood on the river bank. The whole had a forlorn, neglected aspect and the water was almost the colour of ink. There was no traffic. At a little distance from the mills, two fishermen sat patiently watching their lines. There was no way across from the mills to the other bank, beyond which ran the railway with a jumble of goods-yards and sidings.

Littlejohn walked down the river path until he came to the first bridge, which he crossed, and then he returned to a spot opposite the mills. A pipe from the engine house emitted hot water and steam. Presumably they also drew water from the river.

Almost opposite the mills, a gate with a stile by the side and a rutted dirt track leading towards the railway. Littlejohn followed it until he came to a level crossing, with a signal cabin standing beside it. The crossing-gates were closed. The signalman opened the window.

“Bit better now,” he said, talking of the weather and evidently seeking companionship.

“Yes. May I come up?”

“Against the rules....”

“I’m a police officer. I’m coming. Want a word with you.”

“O.K. Kim on.”

A cosy sort of place with a stove burning. Pots with geraniums and cactus on the window-sills. A small table with the remains of a rough meal still on it. About a dozen levers and a large wheel for operating the crossing gates.

“What can I do for you?”

“Do you remember the night Ambrose Barrow was killed at the mill?”

“Aye. I was on duty here. Saw nothing.”

“It was a bad night.”

“Yes. Rainin’ cats and dogs and as black as ink.”

A goods train passed and they had to suspend the session; you couldn’t hear a thing for the roar and rattle of the waggons. The signalman released three levers when the whole had passed and then went to the wheel and opened the gates.

“Do you get a lot of people passing?”

“Not many. It’s the way from the river bank to the top of the town. That’s the station there, with the goods yard, but if you keep to this path you come to the main road out of Brockfield.”

They looked through the window over the wheel.

“I suppose traffic for the station and yards mainly uses this way from the various mills...”

“That’s right. That road there goes to the station. At the fork the way to the right narrows to a path. That’s the one that goes up town.”

“You see most that goes on?”

“Oh, aye. I’ve not much to do between trains. Specially after the yards close at half-past five. When it’s a nice night I don’t miss much. There’s a gas-lamp just by the gates there. See it?”

“Yes. Now throw your mind back to the night of the crime. Did anybody pass this way between say six and seven?”

“Now you’re asking me! It’s so long since and it was such a rotten night...”

The signalman paused to meditate. A pleasant fellow, small, wiry, sharp-eyed, dressed in the regulation uniform with a sleeved waistcoat with shining buttons.

“There was one thing I remember. Never connected it with the business at the mill. Don’t now, because there’s no way from the mills to this side without going half a mile down the river path and crossing the bridge and coming back.”

“What did you see?”

“A fellow climbed the crossing gates. As I said, it was as black as ink though the gas-lamp was on. Well, this chap mustn’t have known his way across here else he’d know there’s a little wicket at the side for foot-passengers, at their own risk, to use when the gates are closed for a train. I had ’em closed then, and this bloke climbed the big gates and crossed the line and off before I’d time to call out.”

“What made you notice him?”

“When anything shakes the gates it sort of vibrates along the gear from the wheel and a rattle started, so I went to look what was ’appening.”

“I see. And what sort of a man was it?”

“I tell you, I couldn’t see proper. Sort of crouching as though he’d got wet through and was in a hurry. He was over the gate when I see him and careered off across the crossing like a rabbit.”



“So you couldn’t describe him?”

“Sorry, guv’nor. Don’t blame me. What a night!”

“I understand.”

“But he couldn’t surely have come from the mills. He’d have had to swim the river!”

“Exactly. That’s probably what he did do.”

“Go on! Not a thing as ’ud tempt me on a night like that, though anybody out in that rain couldn’t have got wetter, even by takin’ a header in the river. Granted it’s not all that wide and only deep in the middle. But I wouldn’t like to swim it in the dark.”

“Neither would I. Thanks for the help. Good night.”

“Cheerio! Well... I’ll be damned. Swimmin’ the river. Wot next?”

Littlejohn left the box and followed the path indicated by the signalman as leading to the upper part of the town. It passed through a few squalid streets by the railwayside and then changed into a paved thoroughfare which joined the main road, with buses and traffic hurrying to and fro. Littlejohn recognised his surroundings. A few yards along the highroad stood the main gates of the Old Hall.

All the Fennings were at home. The old man’s funeral was on the morrow and things were at sixes and sevens. Some relatives had arrived and were being entertained for the night.

The maid who answered the door put Littlejohn in a small cosy ante-room and brought Mary to see him.

“Good evening, Mrs. Fenning. I’m here again...”

She was wearing a navy-blue twin-set and a tweed skirt. She looked fresh and poised among all the confusion.

“Sorry to call at this time, but I’m anxious to check up one or two points.”

“Please don’t apologise. We’ll help all we can.”

“I’m wanting to know, as a matter of routine, exactly where you all were when Ambrose Barrow met his death. Were you all indoors?”

“Yes. Mr. Fenning senior was having his dinner in bed. Mr. Andrew and I dined together in the dining-room and Mr. James had a tray in his study, where he was working on his book.”

“He’s very keen on his book, I gather.”

Mary gave Littlejohn a strange look.

“Yes. It’s practically his main interest outside the mills. He spends a lot of time on it. He’s very keen on the family and its history.”

“And often has his meals whilst he works?”

“Yes.”

“Is he in his study now?”

“No. He’s with the guests in the drawing-room.”

“May I take a peep in this holy of holies?”

The girl looked puzzled again.

“Of course, if you wish. Come this way.”

Along a corridor to a heavy, panelled door and then into a small, cosy, book-lined room with a broad bay-window. Littlejohn examined the sashes which worked perfectly.

In one corner stood a large steel cabinet. Apparently James’s records. On the table was a conglomeration of papers and manuscripts.

“So this is it? Very nice, too.”

“That all you wish to see?”

“Yes, thanks. Is Mr. Andrew in?”

“Yes. Shall I bring him?”

“If you please....”

Andrew looked puzzled but was as good-tempered as ever.

“I’m just checking details of the night of the crime....”

“What again! Thought you’d gone all over that once.”

“Yes. But I must get a bit closer to things. You said you were all at home when the crime occurred?”

“Yes.”

“You and Mrs. Fenning dined in the dining-room and Mr. James in his study.”

“Yes. Who told you James was in the study?”

“Mrs. Fenning. I just asked her.”

Andrew looked nettled for the first time and Littlejohn knew why. He’d originally given the impression that James had eaten his meal with the rest. Now, it turned out, he ate it alone.

“How long did the meal take?”

“Half an hour. Why...? Now look here, you’re not implying that one of us left here and sneaked to the mill and killed Barrow, are you?”

“No. But Mr. James was here on his own for half an hour at least, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. But I called in about half-way through the meal. We’d got up a bottle of Sauternes of which James was very fond, and I brought the bottle along to give him some.”

“I see. Very well, thank you sir. That will be all.” Andrew Fenning rubbed his chin and smiled. Littlejohn didn’t like the smile. It wasn’t in keeping with the rest of Andrew. A bit self-satisfied and triumphant....

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# THE SHADY LAWYER

THE Lacklands lived in a semi-detached, substantial old house in the upper part of the town. Vera Lackland answered the door. She looked surprised to see the Inspector.

“Hullo! Fancy seeing you again! Is it me you want to see?”

“No, Miss Lackland. Is your sister in?”

“Janet? Why, yes. Come in.”

The furniture was old fashioned, probably dating to the time when the parents had set up house. Vera showed Littlejohn into a parlour without a fire. Evidently used for state occasions and a bit damp and musty in the meantime. The suite was in leather, very cold-looking; the sideboard, heavy mahogany; the pictures on the walls, sentimental prints popular thirty years ago. Funny, the girls hadn’t altered all that. Perhaps the father was a strong-minded man....

Here he was!

Old Lackland wasn’t going to have the police visiting his daughter without knowing what it was all about.

“Good afternoon,” very stiff and formal and forbidding.

The old man was iron-grey haired, tall, heavy and wore old-fashioned spectacles perched on his nose. He had a newspaper in his hand, as though disturbed reading the news. His hair was unruly.

“You wanted to see my daughter?”

“If you please, sir.”

“What’s it all about?”

The old man looked ready to ask Littlejohn what his intentions were!

“I’m on the Barrow murder case. I want to ask her a few questions about the office.”

“I see. Well, go easy. She’s highly strung and this affair has upset her. I’ll send her...”

Janet Lackland looked pale and ill as though her nights were spent in weeping.

“Hullo,” she said, like greeting a friend.

“Hullo, Miss Lackland. How are you? I’d like to ask you a few more questions, if I may.”

“I’ll do what I can, Inspector.”

“Well.... I’m afraid they’re going to be rather personal ones. You and Mr. Barrow were in love? Please tell me frankly. I’ll respect any information you may give me.”

“Yes....”

Tears began to flow again.

“And had he been free, you’d have been married?”

“Yes....”

“Mr. Barrow was taking steps to get his freedom.”

The girl looked scared.

“Please, Inspector, now that he’s dead, don’t let that get abroad. My father’s very strict and he didn’t know about Ambrose and me. Ambrose was going to get a divorce first and then, after a time, tell father. If father hadn’t agreed, we would have married without his consent.”

“Well, I know that Mr. Barrow had grounds for divorce, but that owing to his position at the Fennings which he didn’t wish to lose, someone else was being cited as co-respondent.”

“I knew that.”

“Who was the real co-respondent?”

“I work at the Fennings’ still and have a good job. I wouldn’t like....”

“Was it James Fenning?”

“Yes.”

“Not Andrew?”

“No. She’d had an affair with Andrew, but there was no proof for divorce. But Ambrose found a letter from Mr. James to his wife which was conclusive. He saw Mr. Miles about it and told him he would sue for divorce....”

“And what happened?”

“Mr. Miles was furious. Not only with James, but with Ambrose. He said he couldn’t have his family-disgraced like that and wanted to pay Ambrose to keep quiet. But Ambrose and I wanted each other, so Ambrose wouldn’t drop it.”

In the heat of the technical discussion, the girl forgot her own troubles and her face grew pink with animation again.

“And then?”

“Mr. Miles said he’d arrange it all so that Ambrose would get his divorce, but someone else would appear in court as his wife’s lover.”

“Dr. Martindale?”

“Yes. And Mr. Miles said Ambrose could keep his job. Otherwise he’d sack him and see to it that he didn’t get another job locally. He said he’d tell the truth about Ambrose and me, too....”

“So that was it....”

“We hadn’t done anything wrong, but in a town like this where they thrive on scandal....”

“Rather. Then did something go wrong?”

The girl hesitated.

“Yes....”

“Well?”

“Well, everything happened at once. Ambrose didn’t want his wife to be battered about from pillar to post in it. He was such a decent man.... He understood from Mr. Miles, that after the divorce, James would marry Flo. Well... James said he wouldn’t. It was only a passing affair and he wasn’t....”

“Ah. So what happened then?”

“Ambrose had a cousin in London, who said he could get him a job. That made Ambrose independent of the Fennings and he told Mr. Miles that he would cite Mr. James after all. There was an awful row....”

“I’ll bet there was. So it ended that Ambrose would cite James, obtain a divorce, marry you and take a job in London?”

“Yes. And that was on the Monday. On Saturday, that horrible little man killed him.”

“Do you think the Jew did it?”

“Who else?”

“Has it never dawned on you that one of the Fennings might have done it to save their skin?”

A look of horror came on the girl’s face and she turned dead white again.

“No. How horrible!”

“Why didn’t you come to the police with all this information, Miss Janet?”

“I never thought.... And I didn’t want to be mixed-up in a lot of scandal. Father would have been furious. It would be enough to make him turn me out. He turned out my brother once for less....”

As though hearing his name, Mr. Lackland appeared.

“Now, have you finished? You’ve been quite long enough. And I want my meal, Janet. Better be getting it ready. As for you, sir, I hope you’ve done with my daughter now. We don’t want to be mixed up with the police here....”

“I’ve done. Thank you very much, sir. Good-day and thank you, Miss Janet.”

Littlejohn felt that Janet was in for a third-degree from the parent who believed that the way of transgressors was hard, as soon as his back was turned.

Mr. Barnard Dobb looked daggers when Littlejohn again entered his little office.

“I told you all I knew at the last interview. I’m a busy man.”

“Not quite all, Mr. Dobb.”

“All that matters.”

“No. Unless, of course, you’d like it airing in court.”

“What the hell do you mean?” he said very unprofessionally.

“You forgot to tell me that the Barrow divorce case had a change in the name of the co-respondent. It wasn’t Dr. Martindale, it was Mr. James Fenning.”

“Who told you that?”

Dobb’s voice suggested pooh-pooh. He was trying to bluff it out.

“I got it from a good source. Mr. Miles paid you to delete the name of James after Barrow’s death, I suppose. Just in case the police....”

“Look here, are you suggesting...?”

“I’m suggesting nothing. I’m telling you, that you didn’t give me a proper tale last time I called.”

Mr. Dobb melted and wheedled.

“Well.... I didn’t see that it mattered much whose name was given. Barrow was dead and the case dropped.”

“It mattered this, that it’s taken me a week longer than it should have done to find out all the facts of the case. Why did Mr. Miles leave Mrs. Barrow the legacy?”

“I don’t know. I guess he thought she’d been wronged by his family some way.”

“Yes. Because Andrew and James, particularly James, wouldn’t marry her after all. Wasn’t that it?”

“Yes. He did it when he got Martindale to take the rap.”



“Why the legacy? Why not hard cash?”

“He was close-fisted. Wouldn’t pay a lump sum. So-much a month and then, as he said he wouldn’t live long, he altered his Will to provide....”

“Very well. And let me give you a word of advice, Mr. Dobb. If you hope to remain in practice, make a point of telling the police the truth in future. Good morning....”

Faddiman turned grey when Littlejohn asked him to swear out a warrant for the arrest of James Fenning.

“But surely.... Not James....”

“Yes. And I think *you* might have been a bit more helpful, Faddiman, if you’d wanted to be. You’ve left me all the work, especially finding out the Fenning background. With your daughter as one of the family, you could have filled in a lot of the gaps.”

Faddiman sank in his chair overcome.

“I’m sorry, Littlejohn. Dreadfully sorry. But I had my girl to think of and she’s all I’ve got in the world. I’m so proud of her.”

“But surely, no harm could have come to her. It was James Fenning, not your daughter.”

“I guess I’d better tell you. You’ve told me about the divorce. The reason James wouldn’t marry Flo. was that he wanted Mary to marry him. He suddenly started pestering her and since then....”

“You were afraid there might be some scandal if it all came out.”

“Yes. What could I do? I’ve had a hell of a time, choosing between duty and Mary.”

“Making mountains out of molehills, you mean. You could surely have told me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, let’s get the warrant sworn....”

“But why?”

“Flo. Barrow was Andrew’s friend for a number of years and then James started joining the party. They went to a place in Burstead and after a time James trotted along there with them. I guess Andrew got tired of Flo. Anyway, she turned over to James. First Andrew started to furnish her house with costly knick-knacks, then James. And Barrow didn’t say anything because they were his employers and he thought, or pretended to himself, that their interest was merely friendly. Then, Barrow fell in love and got evidence for a divorce. Old Miles got wind of it and tried to cook

the affair to keep out his family. He used pressure on Barrow, too, who didn't at the time want to lose his job."

Faddiman sat with staring eyes. All this had been going on under his nose and he hadn't spotted a thing.

"Miles paid Dr. Martindale to take the blame. But Barrow learned that neither of the Fennings intended to marry Flo. when she was free. At the same time he got an offer of a job in London. He got his back up and said he'd cite James Fenning. James happens to be crazy about family honour and such like, although he doesn't mind having his good times if he can keep it dark.... So, I reckon, James killed Barrow...."

"But how...? He'd got an alibi. Andrew...."

"That family stick like glue. Andrew said they were together at dinner when the crime occurred. But your daughter let slip that James had his in his room whilst she and Andrew were in the dining-room. James could have slipped out by the window, killed Barrow and returned.... When I faced Andrew with the lonely meal, he stood by his brother by saying he came in his room half-way through the meal. I don't believe him."

"But the disguise?"

"This is how I figure it. There've been funny things going on at the mill lately. An old lady sick-nursing nearby, and a shrewd woman, too, says she heard lorries moving out at nights. It looks to me as though James, or James and Andrew were selling stock on the quiet. The old man controlled the mills and was as tight-fisted as could be. He kept the sons under his thumb and presumably said what their incomes had to be. The rate those two lived probably took more than the old man granted. So they found other ways. Everybody at the mill's as close as an oyster about it. That shifty watchman, Haxley, has something he won't tell...."

"Still...."

"Suppose James were actively interested in this secret stock-lifting. He'd go to superintend, perhaps. Dressed in old clothes, a cap and maybe, for those he didn't want to guess his identity, whiskers... *and* make-up, if needs be. As good as a burglar's mask and not half so melodramatic."

"But what about Barrow?"

"When Barrow decided to name him in the divorce case, James made up his mind to kill him. He arranged for Barrow to go and meet the Jew dealer, but was waiting there himself. He killed Barrow and cleared off. But.... He'd gone down dressed in his make-up in case anyone spotted him

entering the mill gates. Someone did. And that scared him. Dr. Martindale was smoking a cigarette at the door of one of the houses opposite. James thought he might be there when he came out. He didn't know how much of him Martindale had seen either. So, having killed Barrow, he made him up roughly to look like the man Martindale had seen enter."

"But how did he get out without Martindale seeing him?"

"Swam the river and beat it along a narrow path home. His clothes were soaked, of course. He'd not expected that, but had to do it, he thought, to save his skin. He hid the clothes and burned his sopping underwear. Andrew found the suit, hidden behind the hot-water cistern. He must have known then who killed Barrow. But he did his damndest to shield James. As I said, they stick, those Fennings. They even concocted a silly plot to involve Barrow in a black-market racket. They tried to make it look as though he'd been cooking the books and selling the stuff. And James had hoped the little Jew would be blamed for the crime. In his panic, however, James forgot or hadn't taken the trouble to find out what the Jew was like. He couldn't physically have killed Barrow, but a hulking fellow like James could. Especially when he's half a madman...."

"Madman! What do you mean?"

"Have you seen his eyes. He's all on fire inside. He's got a craze for the family, too. That would be quite enough...."

"Well.... I may as well tell you. He is a bit dotty. I found out too late that there's a queer streak in the family, to say the least of it. Mr. Miles's father used to have to go away to a 'nursing-home' at times, and, more than once, they've had to lock James in his room for days together. But what about Old Miles? Did James kill him?"

"Yes. Andrew may have told him, or he may have guessed, or anything. He was a shrewd old man. He must have taxed James with it and said he'd have to take the consequences. Maybe he said he'd have to marry Flo. now.... Anyhow, I think James got the poison from Dr. Martindale. The doctor was careless when he was drunk and left his poison cabinet open one day when James was there.... And James, who by way of being a good chemist, could easily concoct the pills. Well, what about that warrant?"

"All right, Littlejohn. I'll get it. Gladly, too. The sooner I get Mary out of that place, the happier I'll be."

"So will someone else, or I'm mistaken."

"What do you mean?"

“Dr. Martindale....”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

## THE DIARY

THE housekeeper was in a great stew when she met Littlejohn and Faddiman at the door of the Old Hall.

“I’m so glad you’ve come, gentlemen. Somethin’s wrong. Mr. Andrew left for London this morning and since then Mr. James has been very queer. He’s had one or two bad do’s in my time, but never so bad as this. Mrs. Fenning’s had a terrible job with him.... He’s been shouting and swearing what he’d do.... They’re in the gymnasium, now. She’s seemingly taken his mind off things by fencin’ with him. Can’t you hear them?”

From the room upstairs you could hear the sound of steel on steel. But it didn’t sound like a sporting contest. There was a stern clash and urgency about it which seemed to bode no good.

“Haven’t you been up, Mrs. Holgate?”

“Yes. But they’ve got the door locked. I asked if they wanted anything, but nobody answered. Too busy, I guess.”

The officers mounted the stairs two at a time.

The heavy oak door was locked. Littlejohn put his shoulder to it but it was solid and didn’t move a fraction of an inch.

“That you, Mary?” called Faddiman.

On the other side of the door you could hear the contestants tramping and now and then a startled exclamation but always the earnest clash of the foils.

“Help!”

It was Mary’s voice.

“Get something to break-in the door. Quick!”

They found an oak settle down in the hall, light enough for the pair of them to carry up. Moving with all speed they brought the battering-ram into action. It needed some efforts, for the door was solid and old and resisted stubbornly. Then, it began to crack....

But before that, silence behind the door, a pause, a cry and a sob, and then moving footsteps.

Mary Fenning turned the key in the door and flung it open. She had a foil still in her hand and the tip was covered in blood. On the floor behind her lay James Fenning, bleeding from a wound in the chest. His left arm, too, lay stretched beside him with a wound through the biceps.

Mary did not faint or cry out. She pointed to James, asked them to look after him and ran downstairs to telephone Dr. Martindale.

James wasn't in too bad shape. The wound was between the ribs but didn't seem to have penetrated any of the organs; he had fainted from loss of blood from the arm.

"He has been queer all day," said Mary, after they had sent him off in the ambulance with two policemen to watch him. "But at noon, he asked me to the gymnasium and told me he had something he wanted to show me. It was his diary. There it is." She handed to her father a small loose-leaved notebook bound in black morocco.

"Tell us what happened before we look at this, Mary."

Dr. Martindale was there, too. Having attended to James, he showed no inclination to leave, so had been invited to have a drink. He had chosen coffee.

"He gave me his diary and insisted that I read it then and there. It was evidently one of a number of such books and contained the most startling entries. About how he murdered Ambrose Barrow to save the family honour. And then, his father, who, it seemed, guessed he was the murderer and accused him of it. He confessed and said it was for the family's sake. To which his father evidently replied that unless he married Flo. Barrow, he would denounce him. He refused, because, he said, he wanted to marry me."

Dr. Martindale thereupon swallowed more coffee than was good for him, coughed, muttered to himself and was silent again.

"James has asked me to marry him several times. I told him the last time that if he did it again, I would leave the Hall and go to live with my father...."

"Why didn't you, Mary? If I'd only known...."

"I liked it here and I think I was the only one old Mr. Fenning would be good for...."

Then she turned to Martindale.

"According to the diary, you were very careless about your poisons. You left James alone in the room with the door of your cupboard open and he took enough poison to kill three men. Just in case he ever needed it, he said. He made some lethal pills for his father's bottle, he said, and just waited."

"The story of the murder of Barrow is very confused. All about his robbing the warehouse to make up his income and disguising himself so

that he wouldn't be recognised on his way to the mill. He thought that very clever. I think it's very stupid. But he was seen entering the mill when he killed Barrow, so had to leave someone behind like himself. He put his disguise on the dead body. Only someone crazy would have done that. And he had to swim the river to get home."

"Yes, we know all about that," said her father. "The Inspector worked it all out, just as the diary says."

"But what's all this duelling business?" asked the doctor, who couldn't take his eyes from Mary's face and whose own face seemed to have grown younger by shedding the lines of worry and dissipation.

"Well, as I said, he insisted I read the diary in the gymnasium. I was horrified. But he didn't seem to mind. He must have thought my looks were of admiration. He asked me to marry him again. And then he seemed to lose his balance altogether. Talked about children to carry on the family name and how he'd rebuild the family fortune and be lord of all the place like his ancestors used to be. He could only do that with me as his lady. That was why he'd let me read the diary. He wanted me to know what he'd done for me and the family."

"The swine!"

There is no need to report the name of the interjector!

"I could see that he was quite mad. I knew that in the past he had had queer bouts and they'd locked him in his room for days together, but now he seemed quite possessed. I tried to humour him, but he wouldn't listen. He got up and locked the door. 'You know all the details now, Mary,' he said. 'Promise to marry me and all will be right. A wife can't testify against her husband and once the diary is burned I shall be safe. Refuse and I shall kill you. For two reasons, I'll not let anyone else have you, and I won't let you tell what you know.' I tried to humour him again and he must have guessed I loathed him...."

Mrs. Holgate entered with a telephone message that the hospital had rung up to say that Mr. James wasn't in any danger. The chest wound was superficial.

"Please go away, Mrs. Holgate," said the doctor, greatly to her surprise and that of all the rest. She made a dignified exit with her nose in the air. "Well... I never...."

"He took one of the foils from the wall and removed the button. 'I want your promise, or...' and he came for me. I snatched one down myself,



intending to keep him off, but he pressed so hard, that I realised in the end it looked like being a fight to a finish. What could I do? I removed the button from my foil, too.”

They looked a queer audience. Martindale hanging on Mary’s every word with a bellicose look on his face and his veins swelling with rage; her father sitting on the edge of his chair his eyes full of apprehension and living the events again; and Littlejohn smoking one of old Miles Fenning’s excellent cigars and smiling admiring approval of the very efficient young lady telling the tale. He wished he’d had a daughter like her!

“James is a good swordsman, but presses too hard. He’s always been that way. Out for a quick kill, instead of a well-executed one. I thought several times he would get me, but at last I got him through the arm. He bled profusely, but otherwise, I might just as well have never touched him. He fought with greater frenzy than ever. He swore and threatened and shouted. I’ve never been in such a duel... never. In the end, I just had to make one desperate effort. My strength was going in the fury and James seemed as fresh as ever. I tried to avoid a vital spot, but I thought when I touched him, I’d got him in the heart. However....”

And with that, she fainted.

“Good job we’ve got a doctor here,” said Littlejohn as Martindale carried her off to bed.

“Don’t be callous,” said Faddiman, bristling and hurrying after them.

That night Littlejohn slept for the last time in his rickety bedstead with the brass knobs. They gave him sausages for breakfast, too, and the landlord was half-drunk when he paid his bill.

He heard nothing more of Flo. Barrow, but later was one of those responsible for seeing James Fenning under lock and key at His Majesty’s pleasure.

Faddiman saw him off to the station. He made an awkward little speech which caused them both great embarrassment just before the train came in.

“I’m really sorry I doubted your powers, Littlejohn. You see, I’m not used to cases of this sort and being involved in what you might call a family trouble along with the rest, I was scared to death from the start. You’ve handled this really well. I congratulate you and I’m very sorry for the poor show I’ve made....”

Thereupon the train came in.

Littlejohn leaned through the window.

“Good-bye, Faddiman, and say no more about it. I quite understand your difficulties. It’s all tied up now and ready for delivery. Glad to have worked with you. And by the way, let me know any other developments, won’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see....”

Faddiman did. He wrote later to Littlejohn to tell him that Mary and Dr. Alec Martindale were getting married in the Spring.

Littlejohn sent them an etching, but it wasn’t a Whistler.

## **An extract from George Bellairs'**

## Death in High Provence

As was his custom on arriving outside his flat in Hampstead, Littlejohn knocked out his pipe against the street-lamp by the door. It was a mild evening in early summer, and he paused to sniff the fresh air of the Heath, which smelled good after the petrol-laden atmosphere of London itself. He was a bit late home and the church clock at the end of the road struck seven as he started to climb the stairs to the first floor.

He knew right away that something unusual was going on in the flat. Meg, his bobtail sheep-dog, which usually greeted him joyfully in the vestibule, began to bark apologetically from the kitchen at the sound of his steps, which meant there was somebody there who found her *de trop*.

As he took his key from his pocket, the door opened and his wife met him. Instead of the usual cheerful smile, she gave him a grave, almost comic look which signified that callers had interrupted their evening meal.

“There’s a V.I.P. here. . . .”

She even forgot to ask the usual question about what he’d had for lunch.

Inside the dining-room a man was standing examining the Toulouse-Lautrec which hung over the fireplace and which Littlejohn’s friends of the Paris Police Judiciaire had given him as a memento of their war-time association. He turned to face the Chief Inspector as he entered.

A tall, athletic man, with a strong nose and chin, heavy determined lips, dark pouched eyes, and a fine head of dark brown hair. He was apparently in his mid-fifties. He wore a loose-fitting suit of fine grey worsted with elegance and, as he turned to greet Littlejohn, he removed the black horn spectacles and gave him the half-haughty, half-surprised look which the caricaturists captured almost every day. It was Spencer Lovell, the Minister of Commerce.

The dog barked again, and Littlejohn understood why. Lovell, a bachelor, owned half-a-dozen cats and had written a book about them. He had openly confessed his contempt for dogs.

“I’m sorry to disturb you so late and in your leisure, Littlejohn.”

“That’s all right, sir. Sit down, please.”

Mrs. Littlejohn entered with the sherry. She wore her hat and coat.

“Don’t let me drive you out, Mrs. Littlejohn.”

“You’re not doing, Mr. Lovell. I’ve a call to make.”

Littlejohn gave his wife a grateful look, rose, and let in the dog. He had, in the past, visited the Minister in his own flat in connection with a burglary, and had emerged covered in cat hairs. Lovell’s cats hadn’t been locked up on that occasion! Meg entered, altogether ignored the V.I.P., and, after greeting her master with a friendly butt in the knees, stretched quietly by his side and started to snore.

Lovell lolled in his chair, sipping his sherry.

“Cigarette, sir?”

“I prefer my pipe, if I may.”

They both started to smoke.

“You’re a bit surprised to see me here?”

They smiled at one another. They were the same build and about the same age, and they got on comfortably together.

“Listen, Littlejohn. No use beating about the bush. We’ve only met casually before, and all I know of you is through the newspapers and from what I hear of you.”

“The same applies to me, sir.”

The Minister raised his eyebrows in surprise for a minute and then smiled.

“We understand one another, then. I want your help, and I couldn’t very well ask you over to the Ministry. All the world knows what goes on there, and this is personal and private. Your wife was good enough to telephone Scotland Yard to enquire about you and they said you’d left. So I waited.”

He puffed his pipe and turned his head to see how Littlejohn was taking it.

“I’ve not put in an official request about you. The Commissioner, however, knows I’m calling and what it’s about. But you are quite free to say yes or no after I’ve told you my story.”

Littlejohn refilled the glasses.

“Your very good health.”

“And yours, sir.”

“It’s very difficult to begin.”

Littlejohn felt a bit surprised. Lovell's reputation as a parliamentarian and politician was high and he had a name for quick thinking. A former barrister in the Northern Circuit, he had been born within twenty miles of Littlejohn's native town, and had risen rapidly after his election to parliament.

"Did you ever hear of my brother, Christopher?"

Who hadn't? The death of Christopher Lovell and his wife in a motor accident during holidays in the south of France had been one of the sensations of the year. It had happened in February and had cut short a distinguished career in the Foreign Office.

"Yes. I read about his untimely death in the newspapers."

Lovell nodded his head.

"That's why I've called to see you. I'm not satisfied about the way my brother and his wife died."

There was a pause and complete silence, punctuated by the snores of the dog. Lovell's eyes were fixed on the picture over the fireplace, as though he'd forgotten what he'd been talking about.

"You think there was foul play, sir?"

"I don't know. I just don't know. Did you follow the affair in the papers?"

"Superficially, that's all."

Lovell rose and paced the rug uneasily.

"I'm so afraid of starting a mare's nest, Littlejohn. It might be that Chris and his wife just met their deaths through speeding along dangerous roads. In such an event, it would only be wasting your good time asking you to look into it. I can only, therefore, leave the decision to you. He was my only brother and we were very close. There were only three years between us in ages and I was the elder."

He paused, obviously trying to keep sentiment out of it and seeking words to express his thoughts reasonably.

"Candidly, I don't like it at all. The accident occurred at St. Marcellin. . . The Commissioner tells me you know Provence."

"I was there with a friend, an Inspector in the Sûreté at Nice, studying the Dominici affair last autumn."

"Ah. . . . Then you may know the place. It's a village between Aix-en-Provence and Manosque, just off the main road, near the southern tip of the

Forest of Cadarache. The nearest town, Manosque, is twenty miles away. Know it?"

"Not exactly, but I visited the neighbourhood. We spent a night in Manosque."

Already Littlejohn felt a vague sense of uneasiness. He and his colleague, Dorange, of Nice, had made their unofficial tour of those parts, and they were decidedly grim. The natives, a secret and clannish lot, had proved most unhelpful. How another unofficial enquiry, this time on his own, would fare, he'd no idea, but he could guess.

"I see you're already vaguely aware of what you're up against, Littlejohn. I've tried it myself, without success."

"You've been there already, sir?"

"To bring home my brother's and his wife's bodies. In the brief time at my disposal I tried to get precise details of how it occurred. Nobody seemed to know. It was like beating my head against a stone wall. You have methods of your own, and a professional knows what to look for and how to do it. I'm no good as an amateur detective."

Littlejohn could well understand it. He still remembered the hard eyes, the secret exchange of queer looks between one man and another, the dreadful feeling of being an utter stranger among strange folk. . . . He caressed the soft ears of his dog and thought it nice to be home among his own people, people he understood.

"Why do you think there was foul play?"

The Minister sat down again and stretched his legs and re-lit his pipe.

"The place, to begin with. Chris used to visit the identical village before the war. He began his career in the army and was a military attaché at the British Embassy in Paris. Whilst there, he made a bosom friend of the Marquis de St. Marcellin, and spent a lot of time at his château. St. Marcellin was in the French army and they'd much in common. Whilst staying with him one time at the château, Chris met Elise de Barge, who later became his wife."

"And the Marquis is still at St. Marcellin?"

"No. He died just before the war. A shooting accident. Chris was there at the time and it upset him frightfully. So much so, that he never went again. He and Elise were married in Paris, he came home shortly afterwards, the war broke out, and that ended Chris's relations with the St.

Marcellin family. Then, they both met their death in the very village. . . . I don't know what they were doing there or why they went."

"Do the family still occupy the château?"

"Arnaud de St. Marcellin succeeded his brother, Bernard, after the accident. I met Arnaud when I was there. A very decent chap and frightfully cut-up about it all. He couldn't help."

Lovell was on his feet again, pacing the room nervously.

"There was a proper official enquiry into Chris's accident and it was found to be due to a skid on a greasy road. The police were quite satisfied. The car hit a tree at high speed. There were no witnesses, but all the experts concurred. They seemed quite surprised that I should continue asking questions."

"They would be!"

"I see you know all about those parts and the French officials. It was a complete dead end."

Lovell continued his pacing, smoking a cigarette now, seeking words to express his feelings.

"I'm a lawyer, Littlejohn, and used to evidence. On the face of it, the thing was obvious. A plain, straightforward accident. I ought to accept it as such. All my training says it's logical to do so and reasonable to accept the verdict."

He threw out his arms in almost a gesture of despair.

"I've never believed in the supernatural, or whatever you like to call it. Two and two make four to a lawyer like me. But the thought of Chris won't let me rest. I can't sleep for it. *I want to know*. Did he die with his wife, both of them smashed to pieces in a fast car, or did somebody kill them both?"

He poured himself another glass of sherry and drank it off without even asking Littlejohn or looking for the Chief Inspector's glass.

"What were they doing at St. Marcellin at all, and why, of all places in the world, should they die there?"

"Did your brother's wife come from those parts?"

"No. She came of a family at Cap Ferrat, near Nice, and they still live there. She happened to be a guest of the St. Marcellins at the time Chris met her."

"Do you know anything of her background, sir?"

"I met her people at the time of the accident. Her father is a retired banker and she was their only child. They were at the wedding, too, but



never visited England. Very nice people indeed.”

“And after Bernard’s death and his own marriage to Elise, your brother never visited his old haunts again?”

“No. They went to stay with the de Barges at Cap Ferrat regularly, but they always went by air to Nice until this year. Then they decided to take the car and go through High Provence and return by the Rhône Valley.”

Dusk had fallen and the two men in the firelight could hardly see one another. Littlejohn didn’t want to put on the lights; the dimness of the room was conducive to conversation.

“Did you go through your brother’s papers after his death?”

“Yes.”

“You found no hint or reason for their breaking the journey at St. Marcellin?”

“No. Nor did I find any diary or record of his connections with the Marquis in times past.”

“It might appear that your brother wished to forget them?”

There was a significant pause.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you think it strange that your brother, after the death of his friend, Bernard, and his marriage, should suddenly shun St. Marcellin and his friend’s family? It looks as if they and the place had become distasteful to him. For example, did his wife break some previous romance when she met your brother?”

There was another silence, as though the Minister had either fallen asleep in the twilight or else had been struck by some truth too dreadful to comment upon. The dog snored softly, now and then crying in joy at her dreams, and the electric clock hummed like a fly exploring the room.

“I never thought of that. And I was never aware that any such thing occurred. They were a happy couple . . . very happy. And yet . . .”

Lovell paused as though exploring in the archives of memory for some record, some sign which might give him a clue about his brother’s thoughts and habits before he died.

“Come to think of it, something must have happened before he left St. Marcellin for the last time. He was always a bit of a harum-scarum in his youth and rather wild as a young man. His escapades were almost legendary in his days at Cambridge, and even in the army. . . . I thought when he met and married Elise that he had simply settled down. He was fond of women

before he married and his name was coupled with quite a few. Just wild oats . . . nothing more. He calmed down after he married. But looking back . . .”

Again a pause, with the hiss of the gas fire and the regular breathing of the dog alone disturbing it.

“Looking back, there did seem to be a kind of sadness in him, as though he’d suddenly become disillusioned. You’d find him thinking about something else as you talked, and he wasn’t listening to you at all. And his wife, if she was there, would gently touch the back of his hand and give him a kind of secret smile, as though she knew what held him and wanted him to know she was with him and understood.”

The Minister struck a match and held it to his cold pipe, puffing softly, his cheeks moving like a pair of bellows.

“You’re a good listener, Littlejohn, and thanks for your patience and for sparing me the time to tell you all about it. It’s most unusual for me to grow imaginative or sentimental. I think we’d perhaps better have the light on. This firelight and the half-darkness around make me almost feel that Chris is here listening to us.”

Littlejohn switched on the table-lamp at his elbow. The spell was broken. There were the old familiar pieces of furniture, the Toulouse-Lautrec on the wall, the portrait of Letty, his wife, on the mantelpiece, and an unframed snapshot of himself tucked behind the clock. It showed him smiling and walking along the promenade at Cannes, dressed in flannels and an open-necked shirt. A tout had photographed him on his way to see a dead body, and his wife said it was the best and happiest photograph he’d ever had taken.

“So you see what I’m asking of you?”

Littlejohn awoke from his own reveries with a jerk.

“If you’ll undertake it, I’d like you to go to St. Marcellin, find out what you can, and try to put my mind at rest. If you return and say you’re as much in the dark as I am, I’ll let it go at that. We’ll at least have tried and my conscience will be easier. If you find it was an accident pure and simple, that will close the affair. If on the other hand . . .”

Littlejohn looked up.

“Yes?”

“If it proves not to be an accident, I shall have to see about re-opening the case with the information you provide.”

“Haven’t you pursued it further through the Foreign Office and the embassy, sir?”

“I have. But what can they do? The French police are fully satisfied. We can’t send anybody official to re-open the matter in the face of official reports that it was accidental. I can’t just go and say to the Foreign Office, I’ve got a presentiment that there’s something fishy about the whole business. After all, I’ve my reputation for levelheadedness to maintain. No, this has to be done privately and the Commissioner has gone very far in agreeing to release you for a week or two to look into it for me. As I said, he told me it would all depend on your views. What do you say?”

Littlejohn knocked out his pipe and slowly refilled it.

“I’ll be quite candid, sir. I don’t look forward to such an investigation with any pleasure at all. I know that part of the South and I don’t fancy conducting an enquiry there, especially as it’s to be unofficial. In other words, I’m going purely as a civilian holiday-maker and while I’m there I shall have to undertake what amounts to a full-blown case from scratch.”

The Minister rose and took up his hat and gloves.

“That’s it, Littlejohn. I’m sorry I’ve taken your time. Your own views are exactly those of the Foreign Secretary and the Commissioner at Scotland Yard. It seems I’ll have to let the matter drop and ease my conscience as best I can.”

He held out his hand in farewell. Littlejohn ignored it.

“But, sir, the thought that an Englishman and his wife, alone save for each other, in that part of the world, might have been murdered and the matter hushed up, also gives *me* a conscience. You see, last year, I was unofficially involved in the Dominici affair. Nobody will ever know the truth about that. Now, you suspect a repetition. . . . I can’t let it pass. I’ve got to go, now.”

The Minister’s handshake was not of farewell this time, but of emotional thanks.

“I’ll not forget this, Littlejohn.”

“You must not say that. I’m anxious to get to the truth now, just as much as you are. I’d like to take my colleague, Cromwell, as I don’t fancy that neighbourhood on my own. Too overwhelming without good company. But two of us would look too much like policemen. I’d better take my wife, sir.”

Half an hour later his wife, returning, found him packing his bag and both their passports were on the table.

## **Love George Bellairs? Join the Readers' Club Get your next George Bellairs Mystery for FREE**

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George Bellairs was the pseudonym of Harold Blundell (1902-1985). He was, by day, a Manchester bank manager with close connections to the University of Manchester. He is often referred to as the English Simenon, as his detective stories combine wicked crimes and classic police procedurals, set in small British communities.

He was born in Lancashire and married Gladys Mabel Roberts in 1930. He was a Francophile which explains why many of his titles took place in France. Bellairs travelled there many times, and often wrote articles for English newspapers and magazines, with news and views from France.

After retiring from business, he moved with Gladys to Colby on the Isle of Man, where they had many friends and family. Some of his detective novels are set on the Isle of Man and his surviving notebooks attest to a keen interest in the history, geography and folklore of the island. In 1941 he wrote his first mystery story during spare moments at his air raid warden's post. Throughout the 1950s he contributed a regular column to the *Manchester Guardian* under the pseudonym George Bellairs, and worked as a freelance writer for other newspapers both local and national.

Blundell's first mystery, *Littlejohn on Leave* (1941) introduced his series detective, Detective Inspector Thomas Littlejohn. His books are strong in characters and small communities – set in the 1940s to '70s. The books have strong plots, and are full of scandal and intrigue. His series character started as Inspector and later became Superintendent Thomas Littlejohn. Littlejohn, reminiscent of Inspector Maigret, is injected with humour, intelligence and compassion.

He died on the Isle of Man in April 1982 just before his eightieth birthday after a protracted illness.

If you'd like to hear more from George Bellairs and other classic crime writers, follow [@CrimeClassics](#) on Twitter or connect with them on [Facebook](#).

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